Cézanne and the Practice of Painting

Kaleigh Winchell

History of Art Department: Senior Honors Thesis

Howard Lay, Faculty Adviser

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> "The main thing about modern painting is this. A painter like Tintoretto, for example, begins work on a canvas, and afterward he goes on and, finally, when he has filled it and worked it all over, then only is it finished. Now, if you take a painting by Cézanne (and this is even more clearly visible in the watercolors), the moment he begins to place a stroke of paint on it, the painting is already there." -Picasso[1]

So said Picasso on the subject of Cézanne, a painter to whom he owed much and whose contributions to the art of painting would become essential for his own work. Picasso focuses on a singular of application of paint. What he fails to mention, however, is the sheer abundance of strokes, each of which functions simultaneously as a discrete unit and as part of a compositional whole. Cézanne's work is in fact composed of a slow and deliberate build up of paint. His canvases tend towards palpable saturation, with commas and daubs that rain across the picture plane. The Mont Sainte-Victoire works, a series of over thirty pieces dated roughly from the mid-1880's to Cézanne's death in 1906, are exemplary in this regard. Those dating from 1904 onward are particularly rich in color. The viewer is nearly choked by the hand wrought quality of the paint, as if the optic nerves were being wrung in an attempt to decipher the mountain and the rural surrounding Provencal countryside.

Cézanne, in fact, belongs to the same landscape as the mountain. Nestled in the south of France near the artist's native Aix-en-Provence, the limestone ridges of Mont Sainte-Victoire rise impressively from the encircling plains. Originally called Mont Victoire (after a battle won by the Roman general Marius in 102 BCE), the mountain was renamed Sainte Venture by Christians who erected a small chapel at the peak in the

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[1] Judith Wechsler, ed. *Cézanne in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), 76.

thirteenth century; its current name, a marriage of the two, was adopted in the seventeenth century. The mountain itself has been a friend to many artists: Émile Zola's father built a dam nearby and Picasso bought the Château de Vauvenargues overlooking the mountain, where he lived and worked in the late 1950's. Its dominance over the surrounding flatlands clearly commanded the attention of Cézanne.

Despite the mountain's importance to the artist, however, Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire project is cloaked in uncertainties. The artist used a variety of media for the works, creating numerous paintings, sketches, and watercolors of the mountain. In some works the summit is barely visible in the background (Figure 1). Should these be called Mont Sainte-Victoire pieces? Nearly all are untitled and unsigned, leading to further doubt about the exact scale of the project. Curators and collectors date the works in relation to one another; there are three periods of Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings, and each work is compared to the others and roughly dated according to similarities and differences. All of this is further complicated by Cézanne's constant reworking of the pictures: the artist rarely considered a canvas "finished" (a likely explanation for the absence of so many signatures), and he often executed a painting over a period of days or weeks. He was even known to abandon a canvas only to add to it several months—or, in rare cases, years—later. A study of Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings is therefore an extremely complex undertaking, one that involves careful looking and a thorough understanding of the state of advanced painting at the end of the nineteenth century.

The first of the three periods begins around 1885 (though historians can never be certain of the exact date) and lasts through the end of the decade. The paintings from this

phase are the most conventional. A *Mont Sainte-Victoire* dated 1885-1887 (Figure 2) can serve as a model from the period (and provide us with a rare signature). As with most of the canvases, the mountain is the central focus, but the work includes elements of the landscape around Mont Sainte-Victoire: trees, vegetation, the flat Provencal plain, farmer's fields, and the aqueduct. The pine tree, for example, is pushed flat against the surface of the canvas as a foil to illusionary space, an attempt to create depth that, we must admit, is not entirely convincing. The viaduct is rendered as a small repetition of arches that have been fashioned using green, semi-circular brushstrokes (suggestive of the vegetation viewed through the arches). Cézanne adds a few strokes of pale blues and grays to establish the top of the viaduct. The plain, which lies between the foreground of the pine and the foothills of the mountain itself, is already characteristically flat; the fields are represented by squares of solid green, and these are interspersed with vertical hatchings of a darkened teal alternating with patches of tan and ochre. A small area in the left foreground is framed by the tree trunk and the small house (later cited by Braque and Picasso in such landscapes as *Houses at L'Estaque* and *Houses at Barcelona*, respectively) which peaks out from the greenery.[2] This area contains the only hint at the faceting of pigment (rather than a smooth, continuous surface, the landscape is broken into tiny tessera) that is brought to fruition in the later canvases. Mont Sainte-Victoire itself is outlined in a grayed cobalt blue.

The second period begins in 1890 and ends at the turn of the century. Generally, these works display an increased faceting in Cézanne approach. In *Mont Sainte-Victoire,*

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[2] Paul Hayes Tucker, "Picasso, Photography, and the Development of Cubism," *The Art Bulletin* 64, no. 2 (1982): 292.

see from the Bibermus Quarry[3] (Figure 3) the firm contours of the mountain are maintained, but the countryside is reduced to simple tiles of color. The trees are still recognizable—their trunks matching that of the pine tree in the previously mentioned canvas, but their leaves (if patches of paint can be called such) are much more abstract. Small strokes of color are built up in layers, particularly in the vegetation on either side of the mountain. There is a clear difference here from the Mont Sainte-Victoire works of the late 1880's.

The final canvases, dating from the turn of the century until Cézanne's death in 1906, are indicative of a clear shift in the artist's technique. A *Mont Sainte-Victoire* in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow is a characteristic example (Figure 4). It is in these last works that Cézanne's thick applications of paint become almost overwhelming. Both Mont Sainte-Victoire and the plains (here it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two) are rendered in mottled strokes of color that blend into one another and become lost amidst the overall visual activity of the painting. Gone are the outlines and attempts to distinguish vegetation and clouds; instead, there is a massive layering of scrubbed strokes of color. Every square inch of the Pushkin canvas is covered with paint (most with several layers) and the mountain has shifted shape: it has become a blocky, angular mass, the exact topography of which is independent of the thing it presumably represents. There is an added energy to the canvas; the juxtaposition of pigments simultaneously creates vibrations *and* the illusion of weight. This is Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* in 1905, only a year before his death.

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[3] Many of the Mont Sainte-Victoire canvases are named for the location from which they were painted, or for other identifying Provencal motifs that figure in the canvas (as in *Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley*, see Figure 1).

But what has Cézanne attempted with these works? What, precisely, was his project? Most of his contemporaries, after all, were painting urban scenes in Paris. By the 1870's Caillebotte was busy painting sweeping views of Haussmann's boulevards and the Europe Bridge. Manet turned to cityscapes like *The Railway* (which depicts Victorine Meurent with a young girl at the Gare Saint-Lazare) and Degas was working on *Place de la Concorde*. These painters, despite their formal differences, all addressed issues of Parisian life and "modernity," among them the rapid industrialization taking place in and around the capital. By the 1880's, around the time Cézanne undertook to paint his mountain, Monet was perhaps his closest contemporary. Although, as we shall see, his handling of landscape motifs bore only superficial similarities to Cézanne's project. Rather than attempt an explicit interpretation of Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings, I propose a more encompassing examination of the works. It is my belief that they, like the works of many modern artists, deliberately resist closed readings. I wish to avoid approaching the works through one specific methodological lens because *each* has its merits and contributions. Instead, let us assimilate the approaches to Cézanne's mountain, and use them to invite new questions and new avenues of interpretation.

1. The Road to Mont Sainte-Victoire

It is tempting to describe Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings as a chronological evolution. As Clement Greenberg argued, these images would constitute a coherent trajectory towards abstraction, providing the momentum for Picasso and Braque in Analytical Cubism after the turn of the century and fueling Jackson Pollock and

Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940's.[4] Cézanne's faceting of the surface of his canvas, which creates an illusion of depth through sheer modulation of color, can best be seen in the Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings. Contemporary critics of Cézanne struggled to find new a language to address the remarkable formal handling of these works. As George Heard Hamilton noted: "Since his death certain verbal constructions have become such common conventions of criticism that the difficulties which had to be surmounted before the right words and phrases were found have been all but forgotten."[5] In 1888, Huysmans, for example, praised Cézanne's use of color in his still lives (Figure 5) and the "bluish shadows" used to create depth, but ultimately labeled the painter as "merely childish."[6] After a century of building a vocabulary to rehearse Cézanne's work, each twentieth century critic's contribution is still merely a way of describing effects, whether through a lens of phenomenology, positivism, or materiality. These approaches to the Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings are, like the works of Cézanne himself, unfinished projects. My list of "received ideas," rather, seeks to broaden the scope of analysis.[7] Why did Cézanne paint the mountain with such ardent devotion? And why has one man's vision of nature, or more to the point, the painted surfaces of that vision that have survived, come to occupy such a central place in the history of modern art?

Allow me to set the stage: Cézanne was born in 1839 in Aix-en-Provence to a wealthy family. He formed an early friendship with Zola; the two attended school together and it was eventually Zola who urged Cézanne to relocate to Paris. Although his

[4] Clement Greenberg, "Cézanne," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 57.

[5] George Heard Hamilton, "Cézanne and His Critics," in *Cézanne: The Late Work*, by Theodore Reff et al., ed. William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), 139.

[6] Hamilton, "Cézanne and His Critics," 141.

[7] My reference, of course, is to Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*, published in the early twentieth century from notes compiled by the author during the 1870's.

father, a banker, wished to make him a lawyer, Cézanne decided to leave law school and pursue a career as an artist. He moved to Paris in 1861 (at the age of twenty-two) and later received an inheritance (400,000 francs, to be precise); he was financially secure. His early works during the 1860's depict dark and violent scenes—fantasies, rape, and religious images among them. There is a clear break between these first attempts and the paintings of Cézanne's later career.[8] It was when he began painting with Camille Pissarro in 1873 that he focused on landscape, still life, and genre painting. Under Pissarro's guidance, Cézanne even exhibited with the Impressionists in 1874 and 1877. Later in his career he preferred to work in solitude in his native Provence and continued to avoid the city. Cézanne of course worked in several genres, but mostly labored in landscape and still life after his encounters with the Impressionists in Paris.

This essay focuses on the Mont Sainte-Victoire works, but Cézanne's artistic contributions are relevant to his work in all genres. *Still Life with Basket of Apples* (Figure 6), for instance, provides a demonstration of the simultaneity of divergent viewpoints (also present in the latter Mont Sainte-Victoire canvases). There are several viewpoints from which the spectator seems to observe the objects in the painting. The viewer seems to approach the white tablecloth (tinged with dark blue shadows) and the stack of madeleines from an angle to the lower left of the painting; but the bottle and basket, because they appear to be viewed from a higher position on the right, create a discontinuity. This produces a complex and unstable image. Cézanne's patchy blocks of color are present here as well. Round apples are molded in small squares of gold, deep

[8] Émile Bernard wrote in an 1891 issue of *Les Hommes d'Aujord-hui* that Cézanne's work falls into three periods: "the early Paris period; the *époque claire*, when Cézanne worked with the strict Impressionist formula; and the *époque grave*, which Bernard described as 'scarcely more than a return to the first manner, [save] in terms of developing theories of color and very personal and unexpected insights into the manner of style.'" (Hamilton, "Cézanne and His Critics," 142.)

red, and pale green. The background, mostly cornflower blue, is slightly scumbled with unrelated darker and lighter strokes of blue. The painting is not a representation of "real" space, but it does evidence Cézanne's interest in exploring compound viewpoints and color relations. The same can be said of *Portrait of the Artist in a Felt Hat* (Figure 7). Cézanne paints himself against a red paneled door and what looks like a blank wall (whether interior or exterior is difficult to say). Here, in 1879 (only a few years before the assumed beginning of the Mont Sainte-Victoire pictures), the facetted qualities of the artist's face and beard are obvious. His face is reduced to tiles of color. The strokes which form the artist's face are either flesh tones or blacks and whites (which are meant to represent the effects of light and shadow). Their application, however, seems almost arbitrary. Where is this light source? Presumably to the upper right, but no real lighting could account for the sharp highlights of white and grays near the right eye in such close proximity to the deep shadow on the right cheek. Finally, a *Cardplayers* scene from the 1890's (Figure 8) shows Cézanne's continued lack of verisimilitude. The five figures, particularly the one on the far right, are blocky. The sense of bulky volume is represented by the deep folds in the fabric of their clothing, which Cézanne reduces to thick black lines. Any attempts at gradual shading and contour have been abandoned. The back wall, the table and jackets of the card players all exhibit the colored squares Cézanne was by then using comfortably in place of traditional modeling. Pale pinks, deep blues, and greens dance over one another to form the flat surface of the wall. And despite their stoic postures, the clothing of the figures is depicted using the same dancing colors that do not belong in the plain blue and brown cloth of a country coat.

What these canvases demonstrate is that similar formal techniques to those of the Mont Sainte-Victoire pictures are present throughout Cézanne's work. Rather than represent the world realistically, he was interested in interpreting his motifs in a way that was increasingly distanced from "the real." The issues discussed here in relation to the Mont Sainte-Victoire pictures are, in fact, applicable to the majority of Cézanne's oeuvre. There are several motifs (both in still life and other landscapes) that he painted over and over; in some regards Mont Sainte-Victoire is simply the most repeated and recognized. Regardless, his preoccupation with the mountain, and its place at the end of his career, signify a special importance—and it is my belief that these canvases are the closest Cézanne ever came to realizing his project.

His focus on Mont Sainte-Victoire began near the date of the final Impressionist Exhibition in 1886. Seurat was just concluding his work on *A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte*, and yet Cézanne was nowhere near Paris (nor was he interested in exhibiting there until the first Ambrose Vollard show in 1895). He became obsessed by his work. His process was painstakingly slow and deliberate. Roger Fry frames Cézanne's struggle to realize his art in theatrical terms, calling his process "the unfolding of [a] drama," and labeling his artistic impulse "feverish imagination."[9] Even Vollard, art dealer of the Parisian avant-garde, once remarked after sitting for his portrait:

> Very few people ever had the opportunity to see Cézanne at work, because he could not endure being watched while at his easel. For one who has not seen him paint, it is difficult to imagine how slow and painful his progress was on certain days. In my portrait there are two little spots of canvas on the hand which are not covered. I called Cézanne's attention to them. "If the copy I'm making at the Louvre turns our well," he replied, "perhaps I will be able tomorrow to find the

[9] Roger Fry, *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4-7.

> exact tone to cover up those spots. Don't you see, Monsieur Vollard, that if I put something there by guesswork, I might have to paint the whole canvas over starting from that point?" The prospect made me tremble.[10]

So Cézanne's was an extremely self-conscious art, and entirely distinct from the rapidly executed works of Monet and the Impressionists. He himself defined painting as "classifying one's sensations of colour,"[11] but obviously an instant rendering of these sensations was not important to Cézanne. He constantly reworked his canvases, believing them to be always unfinished.

But perhaps the most striking difference between Cézanne and the Parisian avant-garde is his choice of subject matter. His motifs were distinct from the urban themes which were so central to the artists of Paris. Cézanne's work is not imbued with overt social commentaries as in Courbet's *Stonebreakers* (Figure 9); nor can his landscapes be read as political like those of both Courbet and Pissarro before him. His works do not seem to have an underlying narrative, and they were not recognized by his first audiences as significant. His childhood friend, Zola, wrote in a review of the 1877 Impressionist Exhibition: "The canvases of this painter, so strong and so deeply felt, may cause the bourgeois to smile, but they nevertheless contain the elements of a very great painting."[12] It is these smiling bourgeois, precisely the conventional consumers of art, that failed to grasp the complexity of Cézanne's project.

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[10] Wechsler, 64.
[11] Wechsler, 42.
[12] Wechsler, 28.

2. On Landscape Painting

How can we, with the benefit of hindsight, situate Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire works in the history of modern painting? First we must understand landscape's place within the hierarchy of genres. At the opening of the century, history painting reigned supreme; portraiture and genre painting followed as counterparts which also included human subjects. Landscape and still life clearly occupied a lower position—in terms of production and reception alike—in the hierarchy of genres. Over the course of the nineteenth century this hierarchy effectively disintegrated.

Classical landscape had allowed the spectator to enter pictorial space with ease, as in Poussin's biblical scenes or Claude's paintings of invented ruins. In *Summer: Ruth and Boaz* (Figure 10), Poussin establishes an entirely orderly perspectival system; the figures in the painting get smaller as they recede into space, as if to reiterate, in terms of scale, what the image already produces perspectivally. The large tree to the left of the canvas defines the foreground, while the vegetation and building to the left are diminished to tiny background scenery, which shows their distance from the foreground. The eye is led into the picture by the gestures and activity of the figural groupings. The steep view of the grain field also leads the eye into space by creating an almost planar surface that sweeps back to the water and mountains beyond. In the seventeenth century, the artist's concern for spatial accuracy and scale are clearly evident. Little will change in the genre of landscape over the next two hundred years.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, landscape established its place as a well-respected art form; it no longer played second fiddle to history painting, and it attracted artists of considerable ambition. By the 1830's, painters such as Corot,

along with other artists of the Barbizon school, began to take their canvases outside to work directly from a motif (Figure 11). Painting in the forests southeast of Paris, these artists paved the way for a "Romantic interpretation of nature" by elevating landscape as a genre (using its motifs to express emotional and sometimes religious inspiration).[13] More than a few of these painters were influenced by ideas having to do with the "unknown" and the "sublime," and landscape provided the ideal way to express these concepts through the power of the natural world. But of course it was Courbet who would use landscape in relation to "realism," thereby setting the stage for a thoroughgoing transformation of the genre.

Courbet's *The Oak at Flagey* (Figure 12) boldly illustrates the departure from landscape's traditional role. The work takes a massive oak tree as its sole focal point. Frontal and impassive, this oak denies the viewer any easy entrance into pictorial space. This grand presentation is a complete departure from traditional landscape; here the viewer is confronted by nature, and overwhelmed by its weight and volume. It was the paintings of the Barbizon school and Courbet that laid the groundwork for the Impressionists and Cézanne to continue landscape's evolution. Without Courbet's oak, Cézanne could not have had his mountain.

The landscapes of Pissarro are equally important to an understanding of Cézanne's paintings. After his relocation to Paris, it was Pissarro who most directly influenced Cézanne; Roger Fry even calls his relationship to Pissarro that of the "apprentice."[14] But if we examine a Pissarro landscape, it becomes clear that Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire pictures are considerably different from the works of his mentor.

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[13] H. H. Arnason and Peter Kalb, "Chapter One: The Sources of Modern Painting," in *History of Modern Art*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2004), 11.

[14] Fry, 34.

Pissarro's *Banks of the Oise, Pontoise* (Figure 13) from 1872 appears to be a simple landscape, but its impact on Cézanne is clear: there in the river and its reflections are the fractured touches of paint so present in the Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings. Pissarro's is a velvety, more muted technique, but the striking difference between the artists is location: Pontoise versus Provence. Pontoise, located in the suburbs to the northwest of Paris, is bordered by the Oise river (which Pissarro takes as the title of his painting). Pissarro has traveled to the outskirts of the city, but a lone smokestack puffs soft clouds over the riverbank. In a time when the industrialization of Paris was pushing people to the suburbs (like Argenteuil) for weekend leisure, it is telling that Pissarro included this reference to Parisian city life and, more explicitly, to the labor of the newly enslaved cast of factory workers. Even on the outskirts of town, in a seemingly natural setting overlooking river and village, the evidence of industrial production in Paris could not be escaped or ignored. Pissarro's landscape serves as a social critique and commentary on "modernity" in France.[15]

By the time of the Impressionists and Cézanne, landscape and still life were no longer subservient to history painting precisely *because* these artists were attempting to escape academic protocol, as evidenced both by their exhibiting independently from the state-sponsored Salon, and by the formal parameters of their work. Therefore, landscape and still life became genres available for artists of increasing ambition. For Cézanne, these genres served as a departure from the ordered representation of objects, and allowed his work to call attention to the actual process of painting rather than to the image

[15] The late nineteenth century was a period that witnessed the emergence of a new system of art production involving private galleries, small one-artist exhibitions, and a growing caste of dealers and critics. Rather than wait for private commissions based on state-sponsored exhibitions like the annual Paris Salon, the artists of the nineteenth century created "ready-made" canvases that could be purchased at private exhibitions. This phenomenon is thoroughly examined by Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White in *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (see bibliography).

represented. Cézanne's art, in his still lives and his Mont Sainte-Victoire canvases alike, became a discourse on one of the most essential problematics of painting—that it is, in fact, always a battle between the surface of the canvas and illusionary space.

3. Subject/Object

Through its development over the course of the nineteenth century, landscape also became a way for painters to rehearse the relationship between nature and an inherent sense of self. The individuality of the artist and his place in the world could be effectively expressed through the landscape genre (an idea that perhaps has its roots in the Romantic concepts of the "sublime"). This project, though much more personal, is not unrelated to the concept of Baudelaire's artist-as-*flâneur* in the urban setting of Paris. His "painter of modern life" was simultaneously "the artist, man of the world, man of the crowd, and child."[16] In Paris, the curious artist lost himself in the crowd, becoming at once a part of the sea of faces and a separate entity. In the rural setting of Aix-en-Provence, Cézanne simply substituted the landscape for the crowd (and what is the crowd if not simply the landscape of the city?) as a way to explore his own internal subjectivity. In the landscapes of Cézanne, the concern was not a critique on industrialization and social stratifications, but instead a project aimed at something larger: the meaning and process of painting itself.

It is the difficult process of coming to terms with this relationship, that between the painter and the thing seen, which informed Cézanne's work. Like the Barbizon painters before him, Cézanne worked *en plein air*. His Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings

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[16] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (1964; repr., London: Phaidon Press, Inc., 2006), 5.

were created in direct dialogue with nature, ridding his work of academic convention (such as elements of scale and perspective) in order to create a "real" or "authentic" experience. Cézanne's is a project about realizing a sensation; but unlike Impressionism it is a slow and consciously cerebral act. This is made manifest through the process of relationships formed between the motif, the retina, the brain, and the motions of the artist's hand. Each of these processes is a crucial element of the act of painting. First, the artist viewed the object. The motif reflected light, and this light hit the retina. These ocular sensations were transmitted to the brain, where the sensory data was processed. Once the artist had mentally digested this information, conscious decisions were made about how to paint the object viewed; finally, the brain sent nerve impulses to the hand of the artist and his strokes created the image on the canvas. As spectators, we then view this product of the artist's mental processes. Cézanne's art is personal, and his artistic production is a physical record of the world as he wished to present it. He was accordingly insecure about being able to accomplish what he set out to do during the act of painting. In comparing Balzac to Cézanne, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes:

> He wanted to understand what interior force holds the world together and causes the proliferation of visible forms. The artist is the one who arrests the spectacle in which most men take part without really seeing it and who makes it visible to the most 'human' among them.[17]

Note Merleau-Ponty's words—the artist "wanted to understand." Cézanne wrestled with the processes of viewing and producing, of *re*-presenting Mont Sainte-Victoire in his works. His preoccupation was with the "spectacle" that "most men" were unaware of, and he was grappling with the methods of making this explicit in his work. Painting

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[17] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-sense*, by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, 3rd ed., trans. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1948; repr., Paris: The Northwestern University Press, 1964), 18.

became a process of seeing and making, a process which Merleau-Ponty framed in terms of phenomenology, which in turn focused on painting as a transformation of "acts of consciousness" into objects for analysis and reflection. The actions and perceptions of the artist produced an object, real and tangible, for critical review. It was the struggle with these processes that consumed Cézanne, which accounts for the body of the Mont Sainte-Victoire works in a variety of media (Figures 14-15).

The watercolors perhaps most immediately capture the process of conception and execution; unlike oil on canvas, the medium does not allow for reworking. It is possibly the most "honest" form of painting. Paper is the usual support for watercolor, and it is both highly absorbent and delicate. The support, unlike canvas, cannot be scraped of any rogue marks; the only method for "erasing" watercolor is a lengthy process of rewetting and blotting (a process that is only partially effective at best, and risks damage to the paper support). The pigments themselves, suspended in water, are more difficult to control than oil paints. Water is an active solvent; it changes the distribution of pigment from brush to support. The appearance of colors can be further altered as the water evaporates and the suspended pigments adhere to the paper. Watercolor is therefore a much more demanding medium: the artist's every mark is permanently fixed to the paper. As Roger Fry notes in his discussion of the watercolor medium, "It never denies its actual existence on the surface of the paper."[18] It is fitting indeed that Cézanne chose the "purest" medium to create images that best render his observations of nature in the field —an unedited record of the artist's process.

And in relation to his Mont Sainte-Victoire oils, Cézanne's method of painting can only be called a process. It began with the dedication to working *en plein air*:

[18] Fry, 64.

packing paints, canvas, and easel and trekking through the Provencal countryside for a view of the mountain. Next, each canvas was compulsively worked and reworked as Cézanne built up layer after layer of color; some over a period of several years (in high contrast to the watercolor medium). The stages of cognition thus rehearsed only increase the sense of process by emphasizing the internal phases of artistic production.

The slippery concept of phenomenology in Cézanne's work is further explored by positivism—the philosophy that holds that the only authentic knowledge is one based on actual sensory experience. In Kathryn Tuma's discussion of Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire works, the artist's "visual experience" and "artistic realization" are inextricably entwined with this "sensory experience."[19] Painting became a vehicle for Cézanne's transcription of his own optic sensations. Here Cézanne's vision is evidenced in the motions of the painter, as recorded by the tactile brushstrokes on the Mont Sainte-Victoire canvases. To imagine the artist in the field, fiercely recording these sensations while confronted with the motif to be captured, is to envision the practice of painting as an almost heroic act. But why should history be concerned with one man's view of "nature seen through a temperament?"[20] And if Cézanne's project can be phrased in these words (as I believe it can), what distinguishes it from the work of the Impressionists?

4. Cézanne and the Impressionists

[19] Kathryn Tuma, "Cézanne and Lucretius at the Red Rock," *Representations* 78 (Spring 2002): 57, http://www.jstor.com/ (accessed October 14, 2008).

[20] The origin of this exact phrase is difficult to discover; supposedly it is a slightly altered version of Zola's words in an 1886 Salon review. The original translation of the direct quote reads, "A work of art is a corner of creation seen through a temperament." The altered phrase was cited by H. Snowden Ward in "Pictorial Photography in Britain 1900 – 1920" (see bibliography).

Of Cézanne, Greenberg once said, “To communicate his optical sensations exactly meant transcribing, however he could, the distance from his eye of every part of the motif, down to the smallest facet-plane into which he could analyze it… the end in view was a *sculptural* Impressionism.”[21] While this touches upon elements of phenomenology and positivism, I am suspicious of the suggestion that Cézanne’s project is a sort of Impressionism. Arguably, the Impressionists and Cézanne are interested in similar formal elements. The process of depicting the behavior of light and color was central to the Impressionist movement, and certainly had relevance to Cézanne’s project in the Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings. Cézanne’s time in Paris, studying under Pissarro and participating in exhibitions, also clearly establishes a connection to the Impressionists. But after his return to Provence it is clear that Cézanne was doing something separate from Impressionism. While his work has its roots in the movement, by the time of the Mont Sainte Victoire pieces Cézanne’s approach to the art of painting is clearly different than that of the Impressionists in Paris and the surrounding suburbs.

There is certainly a tangible quality to the *Mont Sainte-Victoire* works. There are some examples where the strokes are laid on in an especially thick impasto. The canvases are rich in paint, and saturated with Cézanne’s palpable marks (Figures 16-17). Cézanne was a builder of pictures, creating the volume of the mountain by a slow and deliberate application (and accumulation) of color. These works have weight and substance created by the sheer build-up and modulation of tiles of pigment. The juxtaposition of these colors also lends life to the canvas. They pulsate and oscillate, an effect achieved by the strategic placement of complimentary colors. The relations of these colors to one another produce interesting effects (as researched by Seurat); fully

[21] Greenberg, 53.

saturated hues that are opposites on the color wheel vibrate when placed next to one another. In the twentieth century Johannes Itten went on to state (in *The Art of Color* as well at the preliminary class he taught at the Bauhaus) that the smaller these areas of opposing colors, the stronger the sense of movement.[22] This effect, then, is increased by the size of Cézanne's faceted strokes, and their vibrations in turn create the illusion of weight and depth on a two dimensional plane. T. J. Clark's discussion on the materiality of Cézanne's work can serve as an answer to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: the world is real and physical, and the canvas is a representation of this. But the actual canvas, Clark would argue, is also a real and tangible object. The product of the artist is a physical entity that occupies space in the "real" and "material" world.

The material substance of Cézanne's canvases cannot be doubted. His works are highly structured, formed as they are by massive quantities of brushstrokes. When Clark discusses materiality in Cézanne he applies the phrase with two distinct meanings: that of the "patiently aligned" strokes that occupy the canvas, and that of the "grounding of painting practice in stuff of the world."[23] Not only is Cézanne's furious brushwork a kind of materiality, but the weight that these strokes lend the canvas itself calls attention to its materiality. The canvas becomes an object loaded with paint. Here we have the opposite of Poussin's attempts to create a "real" illusionary space. Cézanne's canvas does not deny that it is, in fact, a *canvas*. It calls attention to its existence as an art object, and as a product of the act of the artist. This dual nature of materiality in the Mont Sainte-

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22 Henry P. Raleigh, "Johannes Itten and the Background of Modern Art Education," *Art Journal* XXVII (1968): 286.

23 T. J. Clark, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Cézanne," in *Material Events: Paul De Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, by Tom Cohen et al. (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 93-94.

Victoire pictures, according to Clark, does not mean an opposition between definitions, but instead an overlap.

> Surely the one version does not simply cancel the other. On the contrary, it seems to be a characteristic of Cézanne's best work that in it the two possible vectors of materialism coexist. They intermesh. They stand in peculiar relation to each other, doubting and qualifying each other's truth, but in the end not ironizing or dispersing it… they reinforce it. They *exemplify* the other's account of matter—by showing it at the point it encounters paradox, and begins to follow a contrary logic. This is what gives Cézanne's painting its depth.[24]

"Its depth" indeed—steeped in paint and multiple meanings alike. For Clark, materiality becomes both a descriptor of formal elements of the Mont Sainte-Victoire project and an avenue for critical analysis.

It is important, firstly, to make the distinction between Cézanne's amassing images of the same motif and Monet's famous series painting. While Monet painted the same objects with the intention of exhibiting his works as a series, Cézanne had no such motive. As contemporaries, Cézanne and Monet are inevitably compared, but the distinctions between their works and unique projects are vast. Cézanne's departure from the Impressionist movement has already been established by his return to Aix; what, then, is his achievement beyond the Impressionists' contributions to modern painting? The most effective answer to the question of how Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings differ from the Impressionist works can be discovered through an examination of Monet's *Rouen Cathedrals* (Figures 18-19). The artist's interest in reflected light and shadows, keystones of Impressionism, are clearly evidenced in these paintings. Monet especially wished to transmute elements of the "natural" world into paint on his

[24] Clark, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Cézanne," 94.

canvases.[25] His palette generally consisted of pastels and muted earth tones; he sought to eliminate the use of dark blacks and browns, instead mixing pigments to create shadows.

The *Rouen Cathedral* series addresses environmental elements. We know that Monet observed and painted the cathedral at various times of day, noting the differences in light and shadow on its façade. Here the passage of time can be seen in the differences between the canvases. Each of the works represents a precise vantage point from a specific time of day; Monet would abandon a canvas if the light or weather changed.[26] In his series paintings, he was constantly thwarted by the inconsistencies of the natural world. In 1885 he wrote to Alice Hoschedé from Étretat of his frustrations, saying "when the tide was just what I needed the weather was not right. I started a good number of things yesterday, repetitions, in the hope of being able to work everyday, but it does not go quickly…"[27] Monet's process, like that of Cézanne, is deliberate and complex; the distinction to be made is that Monet's focus is on capturing the transitory effects of light specific to a single time of day.

While this is true for all of Monet's series paintings, the *Rouen Cathedral* works evidence an especially great concern for light and its shifting effects. Because he is painting a cathedral façade, the surface is laced with dimples and nooks. In each canvas Monet renders different effects of light and shade in the minute craters of the façade. The various parts of the cathedral itself are emphasized in each type of light: sometimes the

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[25] In his *La Gare Saint Lazare* works from the 1870's, for example, Monet recorded his impressions of the modern world. Although his chosen motif here is allegedly "modernity," Monet was more interested in establishing a formal equivalent for his theme in paint than in actually recording modern life. The steam of the train fogs the foreground, making it difficult to discern the train and the station. The picture limits the spectator's view into illusionary space—the paint/steam blocks the gaze.

[26] George Heard Hamilton, "Cézanne, Bergson and the Image of Time" (paper presented at the section on Modern Art in the Annunal Meeting of CAA, Jan. 26, 1956, Pittsburgh), in JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/ (accessed October 14, 2008).

[27] Steven Z. Levine, "Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 72.

pale ochre of the door blends with the highlighted façade, other times the deep shadows accentuate the archivolts above the tympanum on the central portal. Each canvas offers a unique version of the architecture of the façade. But even in serial exhibition, the canvases do not represent a continuous passage of time. Monet's goal is not to establish a sort of chronology depicting the shifting of the light from hour to hour. Each canvas is instead a contained and isolated moment. Any sense of sequence or unity can only be attributed to the works by the observer, as a continuity between canvases has not been established by the artist.[28]

This is drastically different from the practices employed to produce the Mont Sainte-Victoire works. Cézanne goes beyond studies of light and the "natural" world; these serve only as points of departure for his project. In Monet, a sense of the passage of time can be invented by the viewer through the differences between the canvases. In the Mont Sainte Victoire paintings, the passing of time figures in *each* canvas (Figure 20). Hamilton implies that multiple perspectives in Cézanne's work illustrate the concept of time through the process of the artist's viewing the motif. Since the painting appears to contain several perspectives simultaneously, it implies movement on the part of the artist. Perhaps Cézanne changed the location of the canvas several times during its exectution, and these multiple points of view are a result (a likely explanation, since most of the paintings were reworked over long periods of time). The relationship between process and production may be further explored through the concept of "duration," as proposed by Henri Bergson.[29] This theory is a response to the conception of time proposed by Immanuel Kant. According to Bergson, Kant and others have substituted the concept of

[28] Hamilton, "Cézanne, Bergson and the Image of Time," 4-5.
[29] Hamilton, "Cézanne, Bergson and the Image of Time," 7.

"time" for that of "duration." Time can be subdivided into hours, minutes, and seconds; it has separate and distinct components, whereas "duration" relates directly to consciousness: both are heterogeneous and continuous. "Duration" cannot be reduced to separate components; it is constant and unbroken.[30] This is highly relevant to the Mont Sainte-Victoire project (and its distinction from the *Rouen Cathedral* series): seeing becomes an ongoing process of consciousness as it goes through time. An impression (as in Monet) is instantaneous; it is based in the units of time—one specific moment from one specific locale and this is not what concerned Cézanne. Of Monet, Cézanne once said, "He is only an eye… but what an eye!"[31] For Cézanne time serves a very different purpose. His is a dual project divided by the brain's movement from looking to making, and from seeing to creating a visible product for the viewer. Rather than a "snapshot," the Mont Sainte-Victoire images represent a continuity of moments and an uninterrupted concept of time.[32]

The representation of "duration" in Cézanne's Mont Saint Victoire works also involves a consideration of spectatorship. Hamilton believed that the educated spectator must approach Cézanne's paintings from a number of different vantage points. This process of observation should be an attempt to re-create the experience of artist. The works call for a dynamic viewing; seeing becomes a process which parallels that of artistic production. And by creating this kind of painting, Cézanne called attention to the process of painting itself. The experience of the spectator mirrors the production of the

[30] Hamilton, "Cézanne, Bergson and the Image of Time," 6.
[31] Fry, 57.
[32] Here, it is relevant to consider that the advent of cinema dates to 1894. Experiments with the Kinetoscope developed by William Dickson and Thomas Edison. began in 1889, and the first public Kinetoscope parlor opened on April 14th, 1894 in New York City. In France, the Lumière Brothers were the pioneers of cinematography, using film perforations to advance film reels. Their first motion picture shows workers leaving their factory, and was made in March of 1895.

artist. While Monet's works emphasize their artifice through the materiality of paint resting on the surface of the canvas, Cézanne accomplishes both materiality and a complex, reflective kind of spectatorship.

5. The Language of Criticism

But why was Cézanne, unlike Monet, considered to be a painter whose project was radically isolated in its difference from those of his contemporaries? The Impressionists were certainly criticized, but it was Cézanne who was singled out as "naïve," childish, and simplistic. Hamilton notes that these phrases were applied by contemporary critics with a negative connotation, but following the artist's death (and markedly after the works of Picasso and Braque) the same words became praise for Cézanne's project. Rather than "brutal", the childish energy in the canvases became synonymous with power.[33]

To trace the vocabulary employed by contemporary critics in reference to Cézanne, the work of Courbet again becomes significant. Meyer Schapiro's discussion of Courbet provides a helpful comparison: "Even his technique of painting impressed academic observers as plebeian and domestic in its freedom; for he used knife and thumb, worked from jars, rubbed and scraped, improvising directly from memory, without applying the learned devices of the school."[34] For Courbet this rough and tactile method (Figure 21) helped to embody an "art of the people" and signified his role as a painter without pretension. Courbet deliberately separated his self-image from that of the urban bourgeoisie.

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[33] Hamilton, "Cézanne and His Critics," 141.

[34] Meyer Sharpiro, "Courbert and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naïveté," in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1968), 53.

> He was famous for his rural patois, a colorful, explosive form of speech that gave pungency to his unconventional ideas and unrestrained feelings. Courbet's conversation had the flavor of rural songs and stories… with their rough humor and barnyard expletives.[35]

So Courbet was the artist of *le peuple*, the "popular" here being a significative morphing of the mid-century notion of something pure and sincere coupled with a lack of sophistication or method.[36]

The ambiguity of the terms employed by both contemporary and twentieth-century critics adds to the difficulty of understanding Courbet's work. Who are *le peuple* and why, for that matter, does Courbet work so hard to establish a reputation as their painter? What is meant by the term "popular," and how has its employment and meaning changed and evolved since Courbet's time? An exploration of these terms and definitions is key to approaching Cézanne's work; the "popular" and the "naïve" are not unrelated. An assessment of the discourse on the "popular" during Courbet's time must begin with Jules Michelet's *Le Peuple.* Published in 1846, this volume rehearses the transformations in society as industrialization gripped France. The resulting social turmoil, Michelet believed, produced a heightened tension between politics and ideology. His solution was a utopian call for unity of the classes. The bourgeoisie, he claimed, had much to learn from the lower classes, for it was in "the masses" that Michelet firmly placed his faith in the goodness of *le peuple* and a preserved sense of nationalism. "The poor," he wrote, "love France as if they were indebted to her and had duties toward her. The rich love her as if she belonged to them and had obligations to them."[37] This somewhat sentimental version of the lower classes, their principles emphasized and

[35] Jerrold Seigel, *Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1986),82.

[36] On the "popular," see Stuart Hall's "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular." I have placed the word *popular* in quotations throughout the text in order to indicate its uncertain status.

[37] Jules Michelet, *The People* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1864), 92.

dramatized, was meant to inspire the bourgeoisie to abandon elitist notions of class and unify France as one *peuple*.

For Michelet, then, the "popular" was "that which is of the people, concerns the people, and belongs to the people."[38] It was amongst the "poor" (those whose love of France was pure) that the nation's future dwelt. He recommended them to the bourgeoisie, calling for a cease of hostilities between the classes. But Michelet, we must remember, was himself a bourgeois republican. Therefore, he advocated the qualities of a social class that was not his own, but that was perhaps closer to that of his father (a printer in Paris). His higher education distinguished Michelet from this lower class; his ideologies meant that, consciously or not, his understanding of *le peuple* was a distanced one. Courbet, too, remained outside *le peuple*. An examination of his own family history reveals Courbet was the son of a landed family from the French countryside. Although he was not an aristocrat by birth, Courbet was raised far from the economic and social hardships of the "working class" for whom he claimed to paint. Like Michelet (twenty one years his senior), Courbet could never truly identify himself as a member of *le peuple*. He exploited his non-Parisian heritage by painting rural settings, always mindful of maintaining an allusion to the "popular."

But in order to lend credence to his myth of "painting for the people," Courbet constructed and constantly maintained a crusty persona: the artist remembered by history is one who frequented beer halls, smoked, spoke in rough patois, and was caricatured with his beard and beer-keg belly. Of his role as artist, he once remarked,

> In our oh-so-civilized society it is necessary for me to lead the life of a savage; I must free myself even from governments. My sympathies lie with the people, I must speak to them directly, take

[38] Émile Littré, ed., *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, Édition Intégrale. (Paris: Gallimard and Hachette, 1877), s.v. "Populaire."

my science from them, and they must provide me with a living. To do that, I have just set out on the great, independent, vagabond life of the Bohemian.

If he was not a member of *le people*, then, we can at least establish that Courbet made an effort to rub elbows with individuals who were. “Who were Courbet’s admirers,” wrote Clark, “but the horde of wine-besotted scum who crowded the Salon each year, and whose sweating bodies offended the bourgeoisie?”[39] Clearly Courbet sought to distinguish himself from the bourgeoisie, favoring instead the “horde.” This “self-conscious creation of a persona whose very radicalism produced notoriety that could be exploited for both artistic and commercial purposes” was absolutely solidified in Courbet’s work.[40] In order to exemplify this mythical artist of *le people*, Courbet heavily incorporated the rustic bearing of French *imagerie populaire* in his paintings.[41] Simply stated, Courbet’s formal handling attempts to appropriate the “popular” and employ it as a method for ambitious painting. In *Burial at Ornans* (Figure 22), for example, Courbet directly cites the composition of well-known popular prints.[42] By employing the simplified techniques of the engravers and draftsmen (artisans of the “working class”) he strategically aligns himself with *le peuple* by elevating the visual culture of the lower classes to the scale of history painting. This was a bold (and calculated) maneuver, and it was an entirely new approach to the project of painting.

While the notion of the “popular” in Courbet undeniably classifies him as political, it can also provide an unexplored approach to the work of Cézanne. According to Meyer Schapiro the appearance of popular culture in Courbet’s works was, “regarded

[39] T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999), 146.

[40] Seigel, 89.

[41] Schapiro, 47. Also called *images d’Épinal* (derived from the printing house *Imagerie d’Épinal*, in the area of France most well known for producing such images), these prints were rendered in bright blocks of solid color and were sold in France in the 19th century.

[42] Schapiro, 50.

as rustic and criticized for [its] naïveté, [its] clumsiness and realism."[43] We've established that this "clumsiness" was Courbet's active attempt to evoke the "popular," but it is the contemporary criticism that provides the crucial link to the work of Cézanne. Of Courbet's critics, Schapiro writes,

> …in characterizing his work as naïve the unfriendly critics of Courbet agreed finally with his supporters. His chief defender, Champfleury, found in the naïveté one of the great qualities of Courbet's painting… "L'effet est le même, parce que l'exécution est aussi simple. L'art savant trouve le même *accent* que l'art naïf."[44]

So the "popular," when raised to "learned art" in Courbet's paintings, becomes synonymous with *naïveté*. Schapiro, perhaps, uses the words "popular," "naïve," and "primitive" too often as synonyms, but he nevertheless offers us a revelatory insight about the relationships between these words. When discussing Courbet's use of popular prints (which he also refers to as "naïve engravings"), he calls them the "contemporary primitive."[45] This is not only shrewd, but it clearly establishes a direct link between the terms.

The vocabulary used to evaluate and attack Courbet's realism is remarkably linked to the words deployed by Cézanne's contemporary critics. The idea of the "popular" as simultaneously pure and unsophisticated—these words relate directly to the language of *naïveté* used by contemporary critics of Cézanne. Remember, for example, Huysmans' characterization of Cézanne in 1888 as "merely childish." It would follow that his works were considered by his detractors to lack sophistication. Contemporary critics both condemned and praised Cézanne's paintings with the same sorts of adjectives

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[43] Schapiro, 56.
[44] Schapiro, 48. "The effect is the same, because the execution is also simple. The learned art finds the same *accent* as naïve art."
[45] Schapiro, 54.

that had been applied to Courbet's work. Hamilton has compiled an extensive list of these reviews, noting the peculiar phenomenon by which the same words function doubly as appreciation and critique—for example, "the works which for Huymans were spoiled by childish incompetence were seen by Bernard as the instinctive response of an innocent, unspoiled artistic disposition."[46] Other descriptors for Cézanne's paintings range from "coarse," "shapeless," "rough," "crude," "worn," "angry," "childish," "illogical," "barbarous," "brutal," "discordant," "false, mad," and "incomprehensible brutalities," to "noble," "genius," "great," "impulsive," "of admirable style and solidarity"… the list is long.[47] The language of art criticism was inadequate when confronted with Cézanne; the same phrases were often repeated by different critics who frequently found themselves unsure of how to articulate their reactions. The majority of critics in the 1880's were harsh; they believed Cézanne to be a painter with no technical skill or understanding of his art. These critics detail the offenses committed by Cézanne's *naïveté*, but it is precisely these offenses which were later heralded as the artist's achievements. It was beginning with the Vollard show in 1895 (and particularly after his death in 1906), that the terms of reproach morphed into approval for the artist's handling.[48] But why are these values—*naïveté*, childishness, brutal energy—appealing and significant to turn-of-the-century intellectuals?

Cézanne's was hardly a "popular" undertaking. His paintings are conceptual and intellectual. The implication of the term "naïve," however, runs contrary to the thought and ambition in Cézanne's work. Does the use of the term "naïve" mean that he could not have had a conscious project? That his work lays outside such forethought and

[46] Hamilton, "Cézanne and His Critics," 142.
[47] Hamiliton, "Cézanne and His Critics," 141-145.
[48] Vollard held three one-man-shows for Cézanne during his lifetime, the first in 1895, the second in 1898 and the last in 1899. (Hamilton, "Cézanne and His Critics," 140.)

contemplation? My answer would be no. Instead, I would offer the explanation that Cézanne, like Courbet, exploited the labels which were applied to him and his work. His was a very conscious *naïveté*.

It was Cézanne's dedication to the process of painting (rather than a drafted and detailed execution of rules imposed by "formal training") that served as the vehicle for his "crude" painting techniques and obsessive reworking of pictures (Figure 23). The same is true of Courbet's employment of the "naïve engravings" as a method for achieving the "popular" in his own paintings.[49] Tellingly, Courbet's friend Champfleury (who was for realism in literature what Courbet was for realism in painting) once wrote: "I have arrived at naïveté, which is everything in the arts."[50] Let us examine this assertion for a moment. *Naïveté* is a state of purity and simplicity, characterized by an element of innocence. The definition of *naïf(-ive)* compiled by Émile Littré in his 1863 *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* reads, "Qui retrace simplement la vérité, la nature, sans artifice et sans effort… Une beauté naïve. Les grâces naïves de l'enfance…"[51] How could one possibly "arrive" at such a state?

Yet everywhere in the intellectual culture of the nineteenth century, there was a conscious effort to capture this childlike state. Intellectuals in both literature and painting harkened back to the people and their "purity" and "sincerity" (also a term used to rehearse Cézanne).[52] The common interest in *naïveté* can be traced all the way back to Michelet—not to mention any number of his contemporaries who consciously explored

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[49] Schapiro, 59.
[50] Schapiro, 66.
[51] Émile Littré, ed., *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, Édition Intégrale. (Paris: Gallimard and Hachette, 1877), s.v. "Naïf, ive."
"Which simply tells the truth, nature, without artifice and without effort… A naive beauty. The naïve graces of childhood…"
[52] Hamilton, "Cézanne and His Critics," 143.

elements of *naïveté*. Courbet and Cézanne are certainly on this road, as are Champfleury and Baudelaire. The figure of Virginie in *The Essence of Laughter* provides an interesting allegorical figure for the values of *naïveté*. For Baudelaire, she is the embodiment of *naïveté*; she is pure and untouched by the "evils" of society. It is not until she arrives in Paris and views a caricature that she "has declined by one degree in purity."[53] Her first appearance in the essay is prefaced by a "Garden of Eden" allusion; this is the perfect metaphor for the statement Baudelaire is making on "modern life": bourgeois society is somehow ruining the "natural" experience of the world; civilization corrupts anything pure and good.[54] This search for the ideal sort of purity was also articulated by Gautier, who, in describing the poet Max Buchon, called him "a kind of Courbet of poetry, very realistic, but also very true, which is not the same thing."[55] The "truth" that these artists and intellectuals search for is a kind of sincerity—a truth which they locate in the "popular," the "naïve," and the "primitive."

"Primitivism," in Schapiro's discussion of mid-nineteenth century art, was "regarded not only as an example of a universal naïveté, but as the source of a conscious naïveté in modern art."[56] This was related to the increasing values attributed to "childlike" painting and the creative powers of children. Richard Shiff quotes Charles Camoin hailing Cézanne as "the primitive of outdoor painting."[57] But what did "primitivism" refer to? Was Schapiro right to use it as a synonym for "naïve?" Probably not, but the terms are certainly linked. Littré's definition included, "L'état primitive d'une chose, le premier état dans lequel on sait ou l'on conjecture qu'elle était… cela

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[53] Baudelaire, 152.
[54] Baudelaire, 149.
[55] Schapiro, 55.
[56] Schapiro, 63.
[57] Richard Shiff, "Seeing Cézanne," *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1978): 788.

dénote une trop grande simplicité."[58] To be "primitive," then, is similar to the childlike, innocent state implied by *naïveté*. It also assimilates elements of sincerity; in 1894, Gustave Geffroy called Cézanne, "a scrupulous observer, as anxious for the truth as a primitive."[59] This quotation references the Italian primitivism of painters prior to Masaccio—a type of painting where advanced perspectival systems were not yet developed, but great attention was paid to detail. The world was recorded in paint based on scrupulous observation, and the effects achieved by such artists (particularly in Northern Renaissance painting) are intricate and impressive. Cézanne, like these "primitives" before him, did not paint with one-point perspective, favoring instead a method based on obsessive observation of the world around him. Like Courbet, Cézanne was striving to create pure and childlike images, looking for direct access to the world without the hindrance of epistemological structures.

This was the "universal *naïveté*" referred to by Schapiro. Cézanne, like Courbet before him, consciously tried to represent the world in a way that was not contaminated by systems of perspective and color. I've purposely placed an emphasis on the *process* of Cézanne's work. For him painting was an act, and it was often a desperate struggle to realize his project. When he carried his canvases out to the fields of Provence, what took place was a sort of meditation. The slow, obsessive method Cézanne employed evidences a very thoughtful approach to the act of painting. Cézanne went through a process, exhaustive and painfully slow, to create a "naïve" or "primitive" image of nature. Of course, his method for arriving at a state of *naiveté* was anything but "naïve."

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[58] Émile Littré, ed., *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, Édition Intégrale. (Paris: Gallimard and Hachette, 1877), s.v. "Primitif, ive."
"The primitive (original) state of something, the first state which one knows or one can guess what the thing is… it denotes too grand of a simplicity."
[59] Hamilton, "Cézanne and His Critics," 143.

Yet in his Mont Sainte-Victoire project, Cézanne has taken "conscious *naïveté*" to the extreme, systematizing the "naïve" in order to escape existing systems of production. Cézanne's, therefore, was a very self-enforced *naïveté*.

But by the mid-1880's, it was Henri Rousseau who represented the ultimate "naïve" painter for members of the Parisian avant-garde (Figure 24). He was self-taught, and his paintings were often of jungle motifs (although he claimed he had served in Mexico during his military years, Rousseau in fact never left France). He worked as a tax collector for most of his life, and didn't begin painting until his late forties. By the time his "primitive" canvases had become a point of discussion for the avant-garde painters, Rousseau was claiming admiration for the licked surfaces of academic painters like Bouguereau. In sharp contrast to Cézanne, Rousseau represents "*un*conscious *naïveté*" in art. His paintings may have a high level of finish, but the bizarre subject matter and blocky style of Rousseau's work was not a product of bourgeois intellectualism (he was distinctly "working class"). Rousseau embodied, rather, the return to the "primitive" mentioned by Geffroy, Cézanne may have actively ignored perspectival systems, but Rousseau completely lacked an understanding of how they functioned. In effect, Rousseau occupied the "naïve" state that none of the intellectual artists could. He did not need to consciously avoid pictorial systems to appear "naïve": he never knew them in the first place. And this was precisely why was he proclaimed the new "primitive master," and why this type of painting appealed to the avant-garde at the end of the nineteenth century and into the first few decades of the twentieth.

The search by the bourgeois intellectuals of the nineteenth century was for an aesthetic value structure that was entirely outside of bourgeois culture—hence the

success of Courbet, Cézanne, and even Rousseau. The perceived ills of bourgeois society somehow fostered an under-expressed desire on the part of intellectuals for an art that was "pure" and without the contaminations of bourgeois civilization. *This* was what made the "primitive" aesthetic so central, and Cézanne was able to bring to fruition a type of painting that had not previously been possible. At the same time, this was what inspired the massive criticisms of Cézanne's work (and the work of those before and after him who painted the "popular," the "naïve," and the "primitive"). These paintings, to many critics (who thought they knew the values which constituted "high art"), were offensive and crude—the work of an unskilled painter. Was Cézanne's project, then, a success?

6. Conclusion

I believe it was, whether or not the artist himself would have thought so. This is why Cézanne and his Mont Sainte-Victoire series have been so regularly discussed. Although Greenbergian rehearsals of Cézanne contextualize the artist as a significant figure in the history of modernist painting, the flaw in Greenberg's analysis is that it is dangerously narrowing. There is far too much involved in the Mont Sainte-Victoire canvases to reduce them to a simple stepping stone along the path to abstraction. Instead, I would argue that there are larger issues at work; abstraction may be a bi-product of Cézanne's project, but it is certainly not the focus. The modernist narrative of the history of art draws a line from Cézanne directly to Analytical Cubism. While the Mont Sainte-Victoire project and Analytical Cubism share similarities, I would refute Greenberg's argument for a progression towards abstraction; Analytical Cubism is not a progression

from the work of Cézanne. It is a reaction. In effect, Picasso and Braque seized on the various elements of the Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings and capitalized on them.

Both artists, of course, painted (proto-)Cubist landscapes between 1906 and 1910, and these directly appropriate the colors and shapes of Cézanne's houses in the Mont Sainte-Victoire pictures (Figure 25). Picasso was "exploring Cézanne's blending of planes, that is, his technique of *passage*, examining the way nature's light and his perceptions both defined and denied form while calling attention to the way an artist describes that dialectic."[60] But this appropriation of Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire project ends with true Analytical Cubist portraits. Lost is the color and wrought quality of Cézanne, replaced by harsh, linear angularity and a monochromatic palette. I would argue that these are a *de*-evolution from Cézanne, not the progressive evolution proposed by Greenberg.

Cézanne's project was, in fact, the practice of painting itself. Although it conforms to many of the claims of modernist criticism—of phenomenology, of positivism, and of materiality—it is not solely about any of these. His was a project which took as its focus the process of moving a work through conception, creation, and spectatorship. And in his desperate struggle to realize his project and achieve an art of *naïveté*, we must examine the irony of a man who tried so feverishly to achieve a childish and uninformed state of consciousness. Cézanne's was an unfinished project because it was based in contradiction. But he was not, as contemporary critics believed, "naïve." He understood the value of a "naïve" aesthetic, and so he set out to execute it. This impossible journey to *naïveté* was a conscious effort by the artist. And *naïveté* was essentially a route to the practice of "pure" painting itself.

[60] Tucker, 289.

In the Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings, Cézanne produced a body of work that "answered" the bourgeois demand for the "popular," the "primitive," and the "naïve." Even though his work was characterized by contradictions (a childlike state versus "conscious naïveté;" "naïve" imagery versus systematic production), it echoes the element of "sincerity" discussed by Baudelaire. Cézanne, finally, is not unlike Virginie. Baudelaire's figure has fallen from her "pure" and "sincere" state in the Garden of Eden, only to be corrupted and spoilt by Parisian society. Cézanne, in fact, was desperately trying to return to this Garden—to escape Original Sin in the form of a "naïve" state of artistic production. Cézanne's art, in other words, seeks an unrealizable truth in the face of a corrupt and cynical world for which truth has been forever lost.

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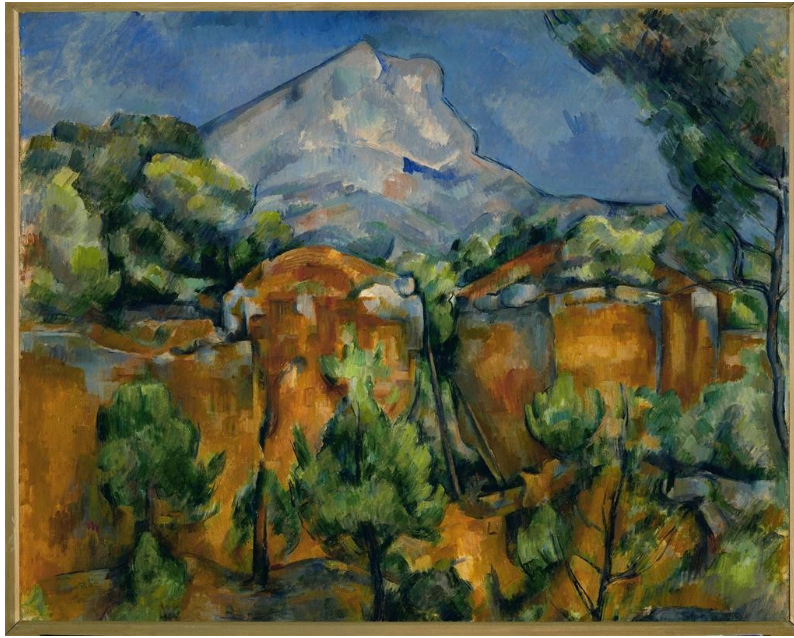
Figure 1
Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley, Paul Cézanne, 1882-85

Figure 2
Mont Sainte-Victoire, Paul Cézanne, 1885-87



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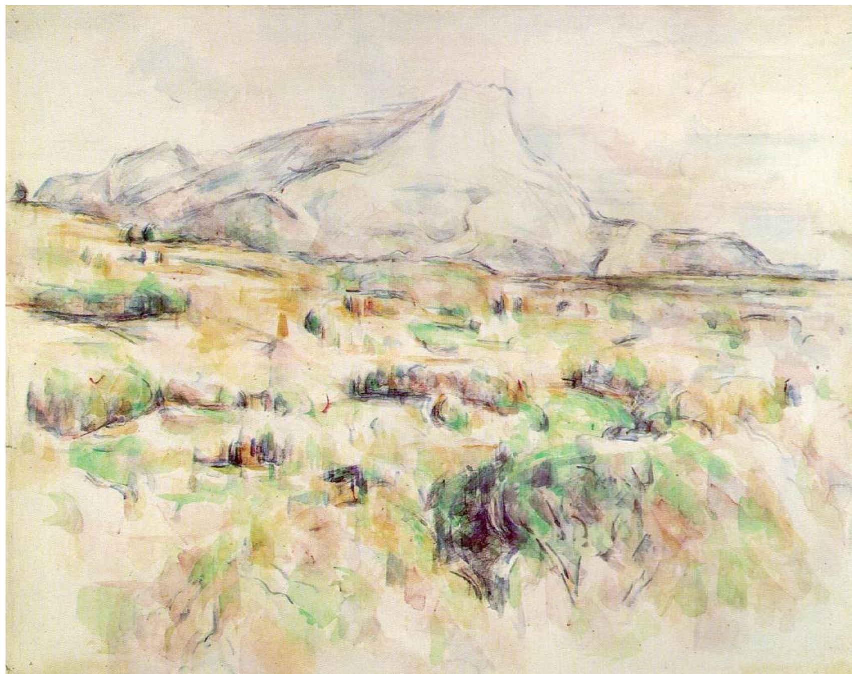

Figure 15
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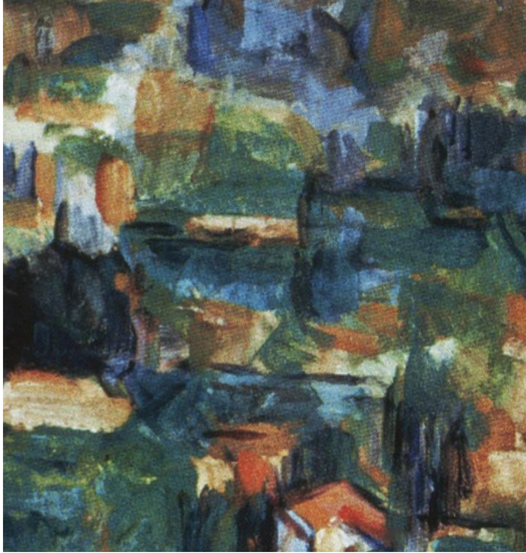

Figure 16
Detail, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*,
Paul Cézanne, 1904-06

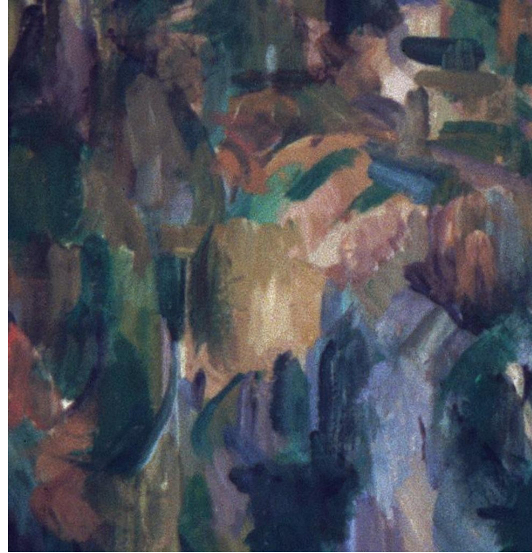

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Figure 19
Rouen Cathedral, Claude Monet,
1892-93

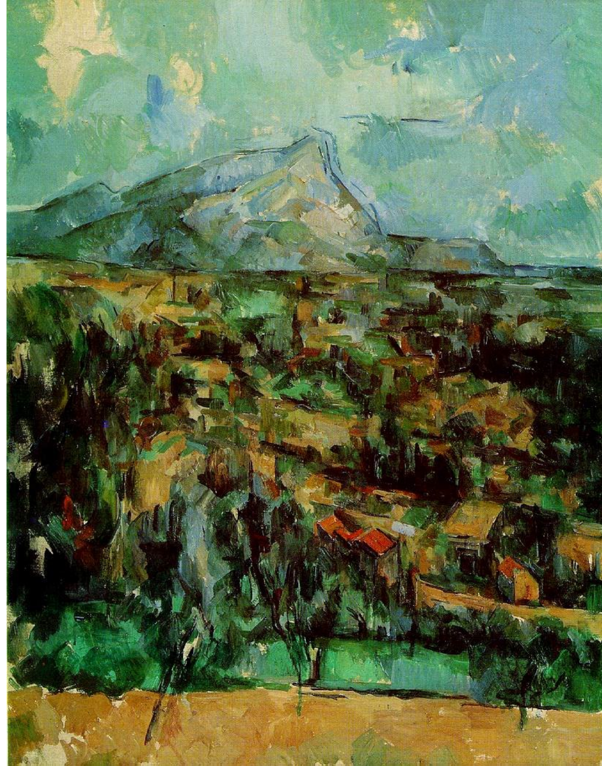

Figure 20
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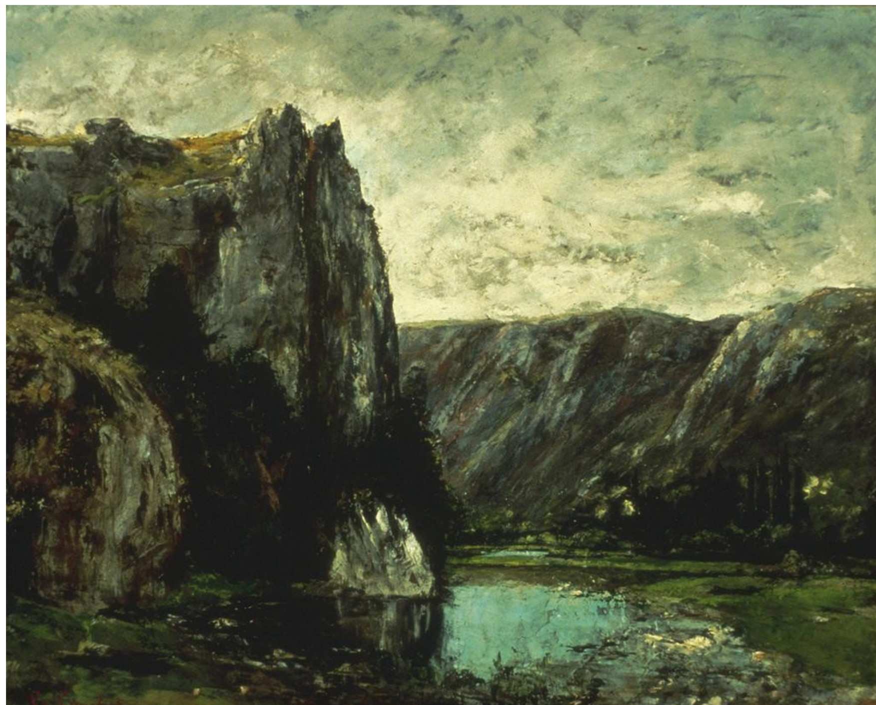

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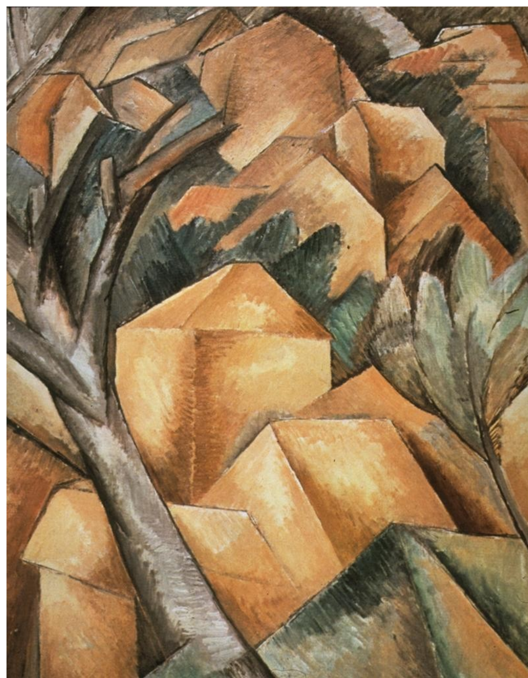

Figure 25
House at L'Estaque, Georges Braque, 1908

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