

Faces, Figures and the Physicality of Paint: Cézanne's Portraits

MARY TOMPKINS LEWIS

IF PAUL CÉZANNE'S still lifes capture the rigorous order and control the solitary painter sought in his studio, and his landscapes the artist's love of his native Aix-en-Provence, what do his paintings of people summon for the modern viewer? Unlike most of his avant-garde peers, Cézanne never received a portrait commission, and many of his painted likenesses of friends and family members offer little information in the way of his sitters' individual personas, stature, or relationship with the artist. Even in the age of Impressionism, when the popularity of the inexpensive, photographic portrait encouraged painters to adopt more informal and expressive means in their portraits or to reveal penetrating insights into their subjects, the Provençal artist defied expectations. He may not have explored portraiture's revelations of others, but these works tell us a great deal about him. More than his landscapes and still lifes, Cézanne's portraits serve as markers or milestones in his long and prolific career, allowing us to ponder his perception and manipulation of the creative process and the genre. Cézanne's portraits not only invite us into the world he knew; they also allow us to contemplate the artist at work.

The Paris of the early 1860s saw an exponential growth of portraits at the annual state-sponsored Salons, where a particularly insipid brand of the genre, which the art critic Théodore Duret would deem 'the triumph of bourgeois art',¹ proliferated. Cézanne spent extended periods during that decade in the

FIG. 1
Uncle Dominique as a Monk,
1866–7

French capital and had to have seen them. And we can gauge his reaction from the first cohesive and compelling body of work in his oeuvre: a series of portraits of c.1866 that openly flout the pomp and polished artifice of Salon painting. These include both portrait busts and costume pieces painted in Aix for which his maternal uncle, Dominique Aubert, dutifully posed. Impressed by the rugged, palette-knife landscapes of another renegade provincial artist, Gustave Courbet, Cézanne adopted the brash technique in a series of likenesses that are built up of broad tonal slabs of paint and reveal above all his unmediated response to the physical facts of his medium. In such paintings as *Uncle Dominique as a Lawyer* (1866–7, p.28), Cézanne's coarse swathes of pigment render his subject's



frozen stare and traditional jurist pose emphatically. They may also bear witness to his own intransigent status as an artist. Some years before, to the dismay of his affluent father, Cézanne had abandoned the study of law to become a painter; the crude bluster behind the portrait may reflect his own defiant choice of a vocation. A related painting of Aubert in the robes of a Dominican monk (1866–7, fig.1), while a likely play on his uncle's given name, is an even more defiant demonstration of the artist's wilful, rough-hewn technique applied dispassionately to his subject's image. The costumed figure's physically confining pose – in which the horizontal of his crossed arms is bisected by the cuff of his sleeve, the upright axis of the pendant cross and the vertical line of his features above – creates a taut pictorial structure. It barely constrains the mute subject's massive form and tactile presence on the canvas's dense, paint-laden surface.

In *The Artist's Father, Reading L'Événement* (1866, p.26), which exhibits both a palette-knife technique and, below, a more fluid and measured touch, the artist seems to take stock of his early history as this heroic period draws to a close. Far less stormy a paternal likeness than one he had painted earlier on the walls of his family home, Louis-Auguste is shown sitting in a flowered armchair 'with the air of a pope on his throne', in the words of the artist's friend Antoine Guillemet. He is reading the radical, short-lived newspaper on which Cézanne's childhood companion Emile Zola briefly served as art critic (the elder Cézanne subscribed to the far more conservative *Le Siècle*).² As he had yet to secure the critical approval of his oldest friend or the blessings of his formidable father, Cézanne's still life that figures in the background (1865–6, fig.2) – painted in the audacious style that had consumed him for months – renders the portrait a manifesto of his potent beginnings and future aspirations. Although many of the locals scoffed, painting with a knife became all the rage for the artist's small band of Aixois admirers.

FIG. 2
Still Life with Sugar Bowl, Pears
and Blue Cup, 1865-6



As his first decade of painting ended, Cézanne continued to forge his dreams of success through portraits of his intimates, but met with crushing defeat. A massive, melancholic image of the older Provençal painter Achille Empereire, a tragic figure Cézanne captured with extraordinary sympathy, would be rejected by the Salon jury of 1870 and brutally caricatured in the press. After the political tumult that accompanied the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1, Cézanne moved to the rural Ile-de-France to discover, under the tutelage of the artist Camille Pissarro (whose likeness he sketched in eloquent portrait drawings), the painting *en plein air* that would come to be known as Impressionism. Landscape would soon supplant figure and portrait painting in Cézanne's art, and his *Self-Portrait* of c.1875 (p.33) marked this dramatic change of direction. Posed with a piercing gaze before a landscape, painted by his fellow artist Armand Guillaumin (1871, fig.3) and depicted as seen in a mirror, Cézanne celebrates here, with vehement strokes and a theatrical flair, the intensity of his artistic vision and newfound focus, and the camaraderie he now enjoyed with vanguard painters in Paris.

Pissarro immortalised Cézanne's new stature in an affecting portrait of the artist in the rough, country garb of a rural landscapist (1874, fig.4). The older artist encouraged his new protégé to take part in the independent (or Impressionist) exhibitions he was co-organising as alternatives to the officially sanctioned Salons. Although Cézanne would show mostly still lifes and landscapes, his submission in 1877 of a portrait of Victor Chocquet (1876–7, fig.5) underscored the painter's burgeoning confidence. Chocquet was a minor government official, ardent admirer of the painter Eugène Delacroix and Cézanne's first real patron. He vigorously defended Cézanne's paintings on view at the Impressionist exhibitions, where they were mocked by unforgiving critics and viewers, and Cézanne's brooding and powerfully compressed portrait, arguably his

FIG. 3
Armand Guillaumin, **View of the Seine, Paris, 1871**



FIG. 4
Camille Pissarro, **Portrait of Paul Cézanne**, 1874

most radical to date, pays tribute to his faithful friend's support and cutting-edge tastes. Indeed, Chocquet became a kind of bellwether, sitting for some of Cézanne's most accomplished figure paintings of the decade, in which the painter gradually distanced himself from the Impressionist technique. His contemporary and fellow artist Edgar Degas, who was esteemed for his own percipient portraits, purchased a half-length canvas depicting Chocquet from this period, and attempted to acquire the most finished of the lot, Cézanne's portrait of Chocquet



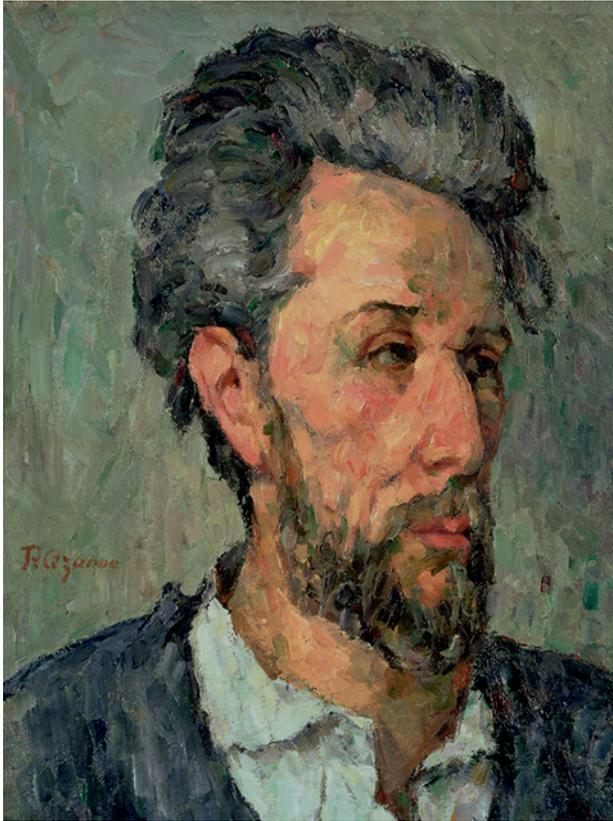


FIG. 5
Portrait of Victor Chocquet, 1876–7

seated (p.34) of 1877.³ Built up of ribbons of patterned colour that glow like inlaid gems, the subject, shown perched on a chair in a decorous pose amid the gilt-framed paintings he owned, epitomises the image of a genteel, worldly collector, while his elegant surroundings evoke the new status Cézanne sought for his art.

The artist rounded out his second decade of painting with works that highlighted his distinctive vision and place within the ranks of the Impressionists. At the urging of his compatriots Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, he sought validation for the movement from his old friend Zola, whose fame now

FIG. 6
Château at Medan, c.1880

eclipsed them all. But it was not to be. Zola's pointed critique of the Impressionists appeared in the periodical *Voltaire* in June 1880. He attacked the group for lacking a scientific or formal rationale for their art and for failing to anoint an acknowledged leader. Cézanne responded swiftly in paint. His landscape depicting Zola's château at Medan (c.1880, fig.6), which was begun that same summer, offered a sweeping departure from the ephemeral, sketch-like views of nature that Zola had faulted in Impressionist painting. His old friend's dismissal of Impressionism seemed to bring to the surface something latent: at once a bold, systematic technique – using ordered, parallel strokes – and a disciplined, logical approach to composition. And once again, a portrait, in this case the *Self-Portrait* of 1880–1 (p.40), is a bold harbinger of the painting.



Apart from his achievements and artistic standing, the painter's domestic life became richer in the 1870s, and this too can be gleaned from his portraits. Hortense Fiquet, Cézanne's model, mistress and, eventually, wife (and mother to their only offspring, Paul *fils*, b.1872), appears in a number of sketchbook drawings from that decade, and in paintings as well. The artist would produce almost thirty portraits of her over the course of his career, and in these strikingly dissimilar and often impenetrable likenesses of his overtly familiar subject – who rarely resembles herself from one canvas to the next and never seems to age – Cézanne would fundamentally transform the pictorial potential and vocabulary of portraiture in his art.⁴

Such paintings as his magisterial *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* of c.1877 (p.39) have become almost inseparable from the praise heaped on them by Cézanne's earliest devotees, the subject eclipsed by reverent analyses. The young poet Rainer Maria Rilke first saw the portrait at the 1907 Salon d'Automne commemorative exhibition. In a rapturous letter to his wife, he praised the painting's delicate harmonies and superb colour relationships, in which it seemed 'each spot had a knowledge of every other'. While the canvas's colossal chair ('the first and most quintessential red armchair in all of painting', according to Rilke) would become a fixture in subsequent avant-garde art, the poet's exquisite descriptions of the portrait's formal characteristics set aside the abiding question of its verisimilitude and laid out the painting's compelling appeal for early twentieth-century painters.⁵ Cézanne's elemental modelling of Hortense's mask-like face in discrete patches of colour would resonate, for example, in the early portraits of Henri Matisse (who acquired two other versions of the subject, including a delicate and almost transparent canvas of 1885–6; p.47). A related – and equally opaque – painting, *Madame Cézanne with a Fan* (c.1879, fig.7), is referenced in the work of Pablo Picasso. It hung in the Parisian salon of the American writer Gertrude Stein, and haunted the Spanish painter as he struggled to capture Stein's

FIG. 7

Madame Cézanne with a Fan, c.1879,
reworked 1886–8

likeness, in the end replacing her visage with a virtual mask – unthinkable without Cézanne’s painting as precedent.

Rilke’s brilliantly perceptive response to *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* makes regrettable how little he said about other works on view in 1907, such as the artist’s *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress* of 1888–90 (p.52). A far more complex portrait of Hortense, marked by the sitter’s strangely bifurcated face and figure, and precarious pose in an unstable setting, the canvas was treated to an extended exposition by the British painter and formalist critic Roger Fry. Although indifferent



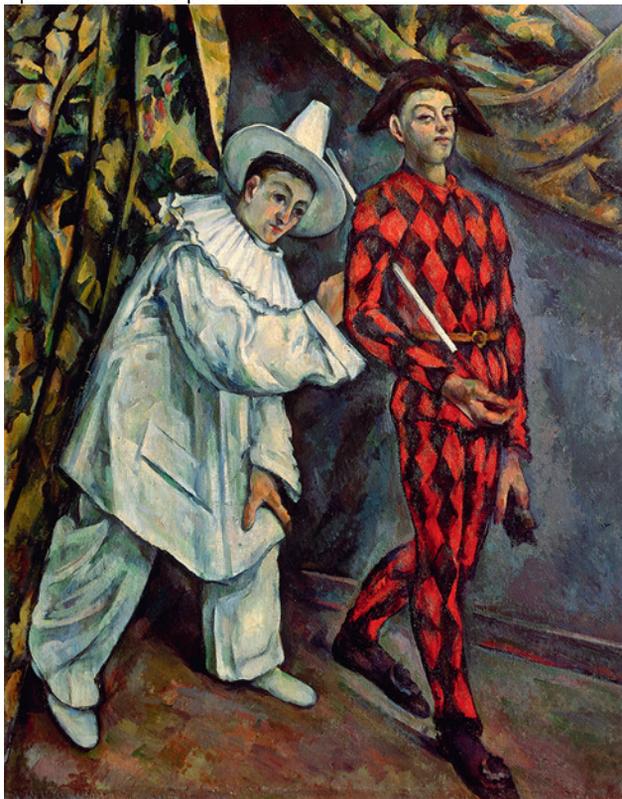
to its subject, Fry was moved by the painting's pictorial harmonies and transcendent beauty, observing: 'It belongs to a world of spiritual values incommensurate but parallel with the actual world.'⁶

Unlike the paintings of Hortense, which continue to enthral and perplex scholars and viewers alike, Cézanne's numerous sketched and painted likenesses of his son have received scant critical attention, serving chiefly as foils to the paintings of Madame Cézanne because they engage us in crucially different ways. To a remarkable degree, in fact, they function like traditional portraits. They resemble each other and Paul *fils* himself, as seen in surviving photographs; they coherently map his early years from infancy to adolescence; and they are imbued with a sense of benevolence, or even tenderness, that is seemingly rare in Cézanne's work.

The oil sketch of 1875 (fig.19) of a cherubic little boy, captured with touching immediacy, evolved from the artist's incessant drawings of his son, who often added his own childish illustrations to the pages of Cézanne's sketchbooks. Not surprisingly, the likenesses of Paul *fils* become more finished and composed as he matures and takes on the famously tortuous task of sitting as a subject for his father. The largest and most complete of these early portraits, *The Artist's Son* of 1881–2 (p.42), for example, is composed of a sophisticated series of reciprocal curves that unify the contours and features of the figure with his setting. Painted in limpid layers of pigment that highlight its graceful linear correspondences, it may draw as well on the rhythmic contours Cézanne had discovered in the paintings and sculptures he studied in the Louvre. But the artist's attachment to his subject remains palpable, and paramount, and suggests the depth of Cézanne's fluency in the art of portraiture that he so clearly sidesteps in some of his more mask-like paintings of Hortense.

Cézanne would test that tradition specifically in his *Mardi Gras* of c.1888 (fig.8). The strangely sober canvas, which

FIG. 8
Mardi Gras, c.1888



was preceded – unusually – by a number of highly finished preparatory studies, is one of his last of Paul fils, who is pictured with his friend Louis Guillaume. The painting is not a portrait, however, or even a double portrait, but rather a staged, studio production that challenges the very nature and realism of the genre. Its fanciful subject, a staple of street theatre, is built around the stock *commedia dell'arte* figures of Pierrot and Harlequin. In Cézanne's sequential drawings of his son in particular, and in the final painting, the demands of portraiture recede as Paul fils takes on the impudent stance and trademark sneer of the cocksure character, Harlequin. Cézanne's *Mardi Gras* became a touchstone for many later artists, who

recognised not only how thoroughly it codified the popular *commedia dell'arte* subject, but also how it generated a creative tension between the realist realm of portraiture and the artifice of theatre.

In the early 1890s Cézanne at last began to enjoy the taste of critical and commercial success, and his portraits pay homage to those who made it possible. In 1892 a short biographical sketch penned by the artist, writer and future disciple Emile Bernard, and a glowing account of his work by another painter and later adherent Maurice Denis, brought Cézanne much-needed new attention. A year later, the well-known art critic Gustave Geffroy cited his painting in short, laudatory articles, followed in 1894 with an enthusiastic monographic essay in the prestigious *Le Journal*.⁷ Thanks in part to Geffroy's help, the art dealer Ambroise Vollard acquired a number of Cézanne's paintings and, in November 1895, organised a landmark retrospective exhibition, where his portraits were much in evidence. Among the eminent attendees were Monet, who would buy one of the *Boy in the Red Waistcoat* canvases, and Geffroy, who purchased one of the more sketch-like paintings of Madame Cézanne.⁸

Cézanne met Geffroy in late 1894 at a luncheon hosted by Monet that was attended by other critics and artists, including Auguste Rodin, and the following spring offered to paint his portrait. As has often been noted, Cézanne studiously emulated Degas's earlier portrait of Edmond Duranty (1879, fig.9), a novelist and critic who had boosted Degas's reputation. Both artists drew on the established motif of a scholar in his study, which Edouard Manet had updated in his flattering portrait of Zola (1868, fig.10). But unlike these earlier portraits, Cézanne's is sombre and aloof, and, in its unfinished state, speaks more to his subject's profession than his appearance (1895–6, p.54). The seated figure is anchored in a stable triangle at the centre and surrounded by a veritable still life of the props of his *métier*: books, an inkwell, flowers and a plaster figurine of Rodin's *Pomona*, a probable allusion to the critical support that Geffroy



FIG. 9
Edgar Degas, **Portrait of Edmond Duranty**, 1879



FIG. 10
Edouard Manet, **Portrait of Emile Zola**, 1868

had recently offered the sculptor.⁹ As in many of the Madame Cézanne portraits, the face is opaque, painted thinly in muted tones of deep greys and purples that are enlivened by scattered touches of rose, orange and white. Geffroy clearly did not mind being rendered, rather than captured. The painting left its subject in awe of its 'richness of tone and incomparable harmony', despite his memories of the artist's painful efforts to complete it. Geffroy must have also recognised the mantle of genius Cézanne's painting conferred on him. The motif of the contemporary journalist or critic as an intellectual was everywhere apparent at the Salons of the 1890s and served to legitimise both their new profession and the vanguard art they endorsed. A few years later, in an equally formal and remote portrait that placed even greater demands on his sitter, Cézanne would bestow upon the dealer Vollard a similarly erudite stature (1899, p.68).

The portraits, which serve as tributes to Cézanne's growing network of support, share with his monumental late paintings of largely nameless labourers and Provençal peasants a sense of hieratic order and equilibrium that renders the subjects of these works heroic. In his majestic *Woman with a Cafetière* of c.1895 (p.59) the figure's immense, volumetric presence is magnified by the pictorial geometry of the panelling behind, but softened by painterly touches of pink in her face and weathered hands, and by the floral wallpaper at left. Indulging in the total control he enjoyed in his studio, and especially in still-life painting, Cézanne augments its emphatic order by including a still life at right, in which the rounded volumes of the cup and coffee press and the curiously upright spoon serve as an index to the figure's unshakeable formal design. Similarly, in his *Seated Peasant* (c.1899, fig.11), a solemn but magnificent icon of rural

FIG. 11
Seated Peasant, c.1899



FIG. 12
The Environs of Aix-en-Provence,
c.1859 (detail)

masculinity, a small still life at lower left of stacked books and boxes and the diagonal of a painter's brush rehearse the dominant lines of the portrait's steadfast composition.

In his final years, Cézanne brought to fruition the themes he had pursued over the course of his career. The complexity and autonomy of his elaborate late still lifes would make them modern paradigms of the genre; his late Bathers, a curious hybrid of fantastic figural and landscape painting, would engender countless progeny; and Cézanne's paintings of Provence would forever etch his native environs into the annals of twentieth-century art. His late portraits also subsume a career rife with struggle, ambition, doubt and, in the end, consummate achievement. If, in his old age, Cézanne honours his own history in the beautiful *Man in a Blue Smock* of c.1897 (p.67) – its background quotes from his earliest known work, a tapestried screen he had decorated as a youth in Aix (c.1859, fig.12) – the artist's contemplations of his imminent mortality are bound up in the deeply moving late paintings devoted to his aged gardener Vallier (1906, p.81). This final series of portraits



would inspire many of the painter's modern admirers, among them, notably, Martin Heidegger. At the close of his own long career, the German philosopher discovered Cézanne's painting, and marvelled, in an ode to the portraits of the humble Vallier, at Cézanne's ability to realise in the mute presence and 'urgent stillness' of the painted image the utter transformation of its subject.¹⁰ Like Rilke decades before, Heidegger recognised the inadequacy of the standard criterion of the genre, that of verisimilitude, especially in Cézanne's gifted hands in which the portrait had become such a telling and powerful aesthetic vehicle. Cézanne's paintings of people, which would fundamentally transform the genre of portraiture in modern art, offer us today but one measure of his ineffable artistic genius.

'FWN' refers to Walter Feilchenfeldt, Jayne S. Warman and David Nash, *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne: An Online Catalogue Raisonné*; www.cezannecatalogue.com/catalogue/index.php

- 1 Theodore Duret, 'Les Peintres Français en 1867' (E. Dentu, Libraire-Editeur, Paris, 1867), p.132.
- 2 The earlier portrait of Louis-Auguste Cézanne is FWN 398 (National Gallery, London, c.1865). Guillemet quoted from his letter to Zola, 2 November 1866, in Alex Danchev, *The Letters of Paul Cézanne* (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2013), p.129.
- 3 Degas purchased FWN 438 (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond).
- 4 In addition to the exhibition catalogue, two superb recent publications have explored the portraits of Madame Cézanne in depth: Susan Sidlauskas, *Cézanne's Other: The Portraits of Hortense* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2009) and Dita Amory, *Madame Cézanne*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2014.
- 5 Letter to Clara Rilke, Paris, 22 October 1907 in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe über Cézanne*, ed. Clara Rilke (Insel, Wiesbaden, 1952), pp.38–40.
- 6 Roger Fry, *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* [1927] (Noonday Press, New York, 1958), p.30.
- 7 Gustave Geffroy, 'Paul Cézanne' in *Le Journal*, 25 March 1894.
- 8 FWN 495 and 467 respectively.
- 9 See George Grappe, *Catalogue du Musée Rodin, I. Hôtel Biron* (Musée Rodin, Paris, 1927), no. 90; cited in Theodore Reff, 'Painting and Theory in the Final Decade' in *Cézanne: The Late Work* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1977), pp.20–1 (Rodin ills.), p.50, n.42.
- 10 On Heidegger and Cézanne, see Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2014), pp.96 ff. Although it is not clear which portrait(s) of Vallier the philosopher may have seen, Pippin (p.121) includes the poetic tribute that appeared in Heidegger's *Gedachtes*:

*The thoughtfully serene, the urgent
Stillness in the form of the old gardener
Vallier, who tended the inconspicuous on the
Chemin les Lauwes.*

*In the painter's late work the two foldness
Of what is present and of presence has
Become simple,
'Realized' and at the time intertwined,
Transformed into a mysterious identity.*