

*Cézanne*  
A LIFE

Alex Danchev

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# *Prologue: The Right Eyes*

The most consequential exhibition of modern times opened in Paris on 1 October 1907: “Exposition rétrospective d’œuvres de Cézanne,” the first posthumous retrospective, a year after his death. It was part of the Salon d’automne. Two rooms of the Grand Palais on the Champs-Élysées were given over to fifty-six Cézannes—more Cézannes than anyone had ever seen.

Everyone went. They went to see and be seen, to marvel, to mock, to argue, to pore over the paintwork, to make up their minds about what they had heard, to investigate what he had been doing, to try to understand how he did it, and perhaps to make use of it if they could. The exhibition ran for three weeks. Some went every day.

In 1907 the Salon d’automne was still short on tradition. Founded in 1903, its primary purpose was to show new work by living artists—in a word, modern art. Its very creation was a calculated act of protest, or insolence, cocking a snook at the existing salon: the Salon national des artistes français, the reactionary institution Cézanne called the Salon de Bouguereau, after the leader of the time-serving Société des artistes français, William Bouguereau. Bouguereau did voluptuary by numbers. He painted ample buttocks on angelic maidens in allegorical poses at astronomical prices. This line had given him everything a man could desire. For a long time he was the last word in the fashionable classical, the epitome of the academy, the embodiment of artistic prowess and social success, and he knew it. In keeping with his station, Bouguereau was a figure of monumental self-importance. Rumor had it that it cost him five francs, by his own reckoning, whenever he stopped painting to relieve himself.

By the turn of the century his authority had been comprehensively undermined, but no one told Bouguereau. Among painters, he and his manner were quietly mocked. Degas and his friends had a word for the chocolate-box effect of any piece of work that looked too slick or too fancy: it was “bouguereaued.”

When the Douanier Rousseau was found gazing at a Bouguereau in the Musée du Luxembourg, the old painter was ragged mercilessly by the young Fernand Léger and his avant-garde comrades-in-arms. But the Douanier was not as naïve as his painting. “Look at the highlights on the fingernails,” he told them. The fingernails had been bouguereaued. Many an artist appropriated those effects. Meanwhile the power of official patronage remained deeply entrenched. The Salon de Bouguereau never stooped to admit Paul Cézanne.

For living artists, the opportunity to exhibit within the stately portals of the Grand Palais was a welcome change of scene, whatever they might think of the potboilers of salon painting. For the hoi polloi, on the other hand, “new work” meant nothing more than newfangled, and “living artist” was a contradiction in terms. Modern art was not what they were accustomed to seeing, shamelessly displayed in public places. No living artist could enter the Louvre. Museums were for the dead, by definition. The art they contained was meant to conform to certain standards. The technique should be competent, the people recognizable, the plot legible, the skies blue and the trees green. Contemplation of the work should be pleasurable or profitable, or both. By these standards, modern art was an uncouth riddle. The conclusion was clear. If it had to be made, modern art was a matter for consenting adults meeting in private. Even the most consenting found it hard to understand, and on occasion hard to stomach. When André Derain saw the work that became *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* in Picasso’s studio, that same year, he observed mordantly that “painting of this sort was an impasse at the end of which lay only suicide; one fine day we would find Picasso hanging behind his big canvas.”

Coming to terms with Cézanne was not easy. The work itself gave ample grounds for offense. On first acquaintance, it ranged from the inexplicable to the intolerable. What is more, it was unfinished, and apparently unfinishable. Cézanne skirted the bounds of the traditional proprieties. He was in many ways a profoundly civilized creature, but he found the forms and trappings of civilization irksome. The feeling was returned in kind. All his days he was characterized as a kind of barbarian. He lived on the margins, beyond the pale. When the writer Jules Renard went to the 1904 Salon d’automne, he discovered works by Carrière, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Renoir. “Carrière, good, but a little too tricky. Lautrec, vice couched in majesty. Cézanne, barbarian. One would have to like a lot of rubbish to like this carpenter of color. Renoir, perhaps the strongest, and excellent!”<sup>1</sup>

Barbarian painting exhibited every kind of imperfection and distortion. Supporters and detractors alike agreed on a single proposition: Cézanne was

strange. He seemed not to see as others saw, but slant. “Painter by inclination,” he said of himself: a Delphic remark, characteristically difficult to interpret. In his pictures, the perpendicular is scorned. Joachim Gasquet’s wife told how her husband had often observed Cézanne out painting with his easel at a slope. Does this help to account for the inclination in his work? “It makes no odds,” Cézanne would say.<sup>2</sup> The angle of the easel was a matter of indifference to him.

The errors were easy to spot; the effects were difficult to fathom. The story was told of a client who stood amazed before a Cézanne landscape amid the marble and onyx of the Galerie Paul Rosenberg. He had never seen anything like it. Paul Rosenberg put him right. “No, Monsieur,” he interposed grandly, “it is not a landscape, it is a cathedral.”<sup>3</sup> Stories of this sort were common currency. Apollinaire published a satire on the theme, featuring the president of the Salon d’automne, Frantz Jourdain, selecting works for the retrospective. In this instructive flight of fancy, Jourdain sallies forth from the Grand Palais to the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune to view some Cézannes. He is attended by members of the selection committee, one of whom carries his box of sweets, another his spittoon, a third his handkerchief.

Upon arriving at Bernheim’s, he charged at an admirable painting by Cézanne, a red painting, needless to say: the portrait of Mme. Cézanne. . . . [He] then turned on a landscape. He charged, running like a madman, but that painting of Cézanne’s was not a canvas, it *was* a landscape. Frantz Jourdain dived into it and disappeared on the horizon, because of the fact that the earth is round. A young employee of Bernheim’s who is a sports enthusiast exclaimed: “He’s going to go around the world!”

Luckily that did not happen. Those assembled saw Frantz Jourdain emerge, all red and out of breath. At first, he looked very small against the landscape, but he grew bigger as he approached.

He arrived, a bit embarrassed, and wiped his brow. “What a devil, that Cézanne!” he murmured. “What a devil!”

He stopped before two paintings, one of which was a still life with apples and the other a portrait of an old man.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I defy anyone to say that this is not admirable.”

“I will say it, Monsieur,” replied Rouault. “That hand is a stump.”

And Frantz Jourdain had to remain silent, for there in fact is the chink in his armor. For him, painting is reduced to this question: is a hand a stump or is it not? Whatever he may say or do, he cannot avoid that

stump. But when a man has spent twenty years proclaiming his admiration for Cézanne, he cannot be expected to admit that he does not know why he admires him.<sup>4</sup>

Apollinaire had hit a nerve. Admirers of Cézanne's art have always been extravagant in their admiration, but they have always had difficulty explaining themselves. The painter-theorist Maurice Denis remarked on this phenomenon in an influential appraisal of the artist published just as the retrospective was due to open. "I have never heard an admirer of Cézanne give me a clear and precise reason for his admiration," he began; "and this is true even among those artists who feel most directly the appeal of Cézanne's art. I have heard the words—quality, flavor, importance, interest, classicism, beauty, style . . . Now for Delacroix or Monet, for example, one could put forward a reasoned opinion, briefly stated, easily intelligible. But how difficult it is to be precise on the subject of Cézanne!"<sup>5</sup> As if to prove the point, Roger Fry, who translated and disseminated that article in the august pages of *The Burlington Magazine*, for the edification of the English, concluded his own pioneering study of Cézanne a generation later with a sigh of resignation: "In the last resort we cannot in the least explain why the smallest product of his hand arouses the impression of being a revelation of the highest importance, or what exactly it is that gives it its grave authority."<sup>6</sup>

Back to work, as Cézanne might have said. Frantz Jourdain is continuing his inspection:

Among the dozen Cézannes at Bernheim's, there was a fruit bowl, all lopsided, twisted, and askew. M. Frantz Jourdain had some reservations. Fruit bowls generally look better than that, they stand more upright. M. Bernheim took the trouble to defend the poor fruit bowl, mustering all the graciousness of a man who frequents the most noble salons of the Empire:

"Cézanne was probably standing to the left of the fruit bowl. He was seeing it at an angle. Move a little to the left of the painting, M. Frantz Jourdain. . . . Like this. . . . Now close one eye. Is it not true that in this way the painting makes sense? . . . So you see, there was no error on Cézanne's part."

On the way back to the basement of the Grand Palais, M. Frantz Jourdain was deep in thought; his wrinkled brows attested to the serious-



ness of his preoccupation. Finally, having thought over the battles he had fought, he pronounced the following words with a sincerity that brought tears to the eyes of every member of the jury:

“The dozen Cézannes at Bernheim’s are extremely dangerous!” He thought a bit more, then added:

“As for me, I stop at Vuillard.”<sup>7</sup>

In the event, the works in the retrospective came not from Bernheim-Jeune but chiefly from two considerable private collectors, Maurice Gangnat and Auguste Pellerin, or straight from Cézanne’s son. Making all due allowance for the fantastical, Apollinaire’s account was a plausible fiction. Whether or not it had any foundation in fact, he made a point of returning to the fray while the salon was still in progress: “There is no need for us to speak about the art of Cézanne. Let it be known, however, that M. Frantz Jourdain, under the pretext of not wishing to tarnish the glory of that great man and of not displeasing the clientele of his backer, Jansen, deliberately under-represented him at the Salon d’automne.”<sup>8</sup>

The members of the Société du salon d’automne were undeniably bold. Even so they had their limits. Article 21 of their statutes decreed that political or religious discussions were strictly forbidden. Their most significant innovation lay in the mounting of regular retrospectives, often of artists still warm. These retrospectives were relatively small-scale—one or two rooms—but they had a huge impact. In 1905, for example, besides the notorious Fauves, or Wild Beasts, with their orgy of raw color, there were retrospectives of Ingres (1780–1867), Manet (1832–83), and Seurat (1859–91), each of them electrifying. In 1906 it was Gauguin (1848–1903). In 1907 came Cézanne (1839–1906) and Berthe Morisot (1841–95). Interestingly enough, it was Morisot who had the bigger build-up and the bigger exhibition. Her work was light and airy; it was well executed; it had a certain delicacy, perhaps even a finesse. There were those who found it preferable. Camille Mauclair, for one, “could not imagine a more striking contrast with the awkward, the effortful Cézanne, where the subtle nuances are constantly betrayed. It’s the difference between a laborer and a princess.”<sup>9</sup>

Gratifyingly for M. Frantz Jourdain, the salon was packed. The spectators were various. Some came as if on safari, to gawp at the exotic plumage and take potshots at the easy targets. Others came to preen and confirm their prejudices. Apollinaire knew their game only too well.

Wear your best skirt, pretty one,  
 And put your bonnet on!  
 We're off to have a lark  
 With contemporary art  
 At the Autumn Salon.<sup>10</sup>

Cézanne had been shown at the Salon d'automne before, as Jules Renard had witnessed. In 1904 he was given an individual room, the Salle Cézanne. Puvis de Chavannes (1824–98), Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), and Redon and Renoir (both still living) were similarly honored. This was a modest retrospective of thirty-three paintings, for the most part selected by his dealer, Ambroise Vollard, whose animal cunning and astute hoarding were crucial to Cézanne's rise to world power status. The Salle Cézanne was a luxuriant affair, complete with potted palm, stove, oriental carpet, and velvet sofa. The paint-



ings were spaciouly hung. Unusually, they were topped with several panels of photographs of other works by Cézanne, not in the exhibition: a typical piece of showmanship by the artful Vollard—a trick repeated in the 1907 retrospective, where photographs by Druet showed the artist's youthful rendering of *The Four Seasons* on the walls of the Cézanne family home in Aix-en-Provence. The photographs contributed to the sense of commemoration. They were much remarked, as was the artist's sportive signature, "Ingres."<sup>11</sup>

The Salle Cézanne confirmed his somewhat paradoxical position. He was at once unknown and famous, as one commentator had observed. Among painters, he was an object of fascination. His peers were his earliest collectors. Monet owned fourteen Cézannes. Three of them hung in his bedroom. Pis-