

Maverick, you cast a giant shadow

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Philadelphia Museum of Art

A detail of Cézanne's "Large Bathers," which is part of "Cézanne and Beyond" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

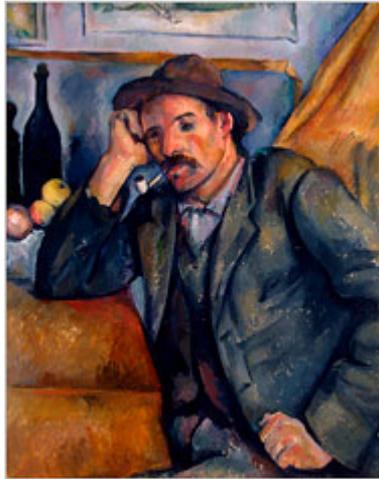
In the family of 20th-century art Cézanne's patriarchal status is unquestioned. His "Bather" is, traditionally, one of the first paintings you see in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent-collection galleries. The statement "Cézanne is the father of us all" has been attributed to Picasso and to Matisse.

"Cézanne and Beyond," at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, refines that lineage for the 21st century. It builds on the museum's 1996 Cézanne blockbuster, interspersing the works of 18 modern and contemporary artists among some 40 paintings and 20 drawings and watercolors by the prolific master of Aix-en-Provence.

Many of these artists knew Cézanne (1839-1906) primarily through his paintings and writings (and sometimes, as was the case with the Italian still-life master Giorgio Morandi, through printed reproductions). But they shared an almost monotheistic faith in his art. As Matisse said, "If Cézanne is right, then I am right."

"Cézanne and Beyond" errs on the side of the obvious, in both the choice of artists and the juxtapositions of specific works. But it's a deeply satisfying show, with enough spectacular moments to justify the ticket lines and plenty of quieter revelations that will resonate particularly for working artists.

The exhibition, which will be shown only in Philadelphia, was organized by the museum's curator of pre-1900 European paintings, Joseph J. Rishel, in collaboration with his colleagues Katherine Sachs, Michael R. Taylor and Carlos Basualdo. Significantly, it also reveals the hand of the museum's former director Anne d'Harnoncourt, who worked on the show before her unexpected death last June, and the substantial catalog is dedicated to her.



State Hermitage Museum
"The Smoker" (1890-92) by Cézanne at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The exhibition takes a nonlinear form, with several smaller galleries branching out from a showstopping central room of Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse. Some artists (Fernand Léger, Liubov Popova) make brief appearances; others (Marsden Hartley, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly) are recurring characters. All of this makes the show feel more open ended (and less didactic) than similar "influence" surveys like "Picasso and American Art" at the Whitney in 2006.

The curators dispense with overtures, plunging right into a series of duets. Cézanne's "Turn in the Road" (1881), a landscape in which a trail that suddenly curves out of sight plays games with perspective, hangs opposite Jeff Wall's lightbox photograph "The Crooked Path" (1991).

If this comparison seems too pat, consider another pairing nearby: "The Bather" from the Modern and Hartley's "Canuck Yankee Lumberjack at Old Orchard Beach, Maine" (1940-41). It's shocking to see Cézanne's pasty bather, gingerly dipping a toe into the water, in the company of Hartley's strapping, suntanned lumberjack. The Cézanne becomes a flesh-and-blood character, not a Modernist Ur-man.

Also revelatory are the works by Alberto Giacometti (portraits and busts of his brother Diego) that accompany Cézanne's "Seated Man" (1898-1900), and the dialogue between Madame Cézanne and Matisse's hollow-eyed women. Picasso's "Rêve" is here too, but its abundant sensuality is held in check by Madame's chiseled features and general air of sang-froid.

The next few galleries hold numerous still lifes by Cézanne's Cubist and neo-plastic offspring: Braque, Picasso, Mondrian. Responding to Cézanne's peculiar fusion of volume and surface, they tilt his table forward and slice clean through his apples and oranges. There's a sense of inevitability around these works, expressed in a quote from Léger: "The power of Cézanne was such that, to find myself, I had to go to the limits of abstraction."

The show reaches a crescendo with a sizable gallery of Cézanne's "Bathers," including two "Large Bathers" (from the Philadelphia Museum and the National Gallery in London). The room has a kind of electricity: Matisse and Picasso pick up on the Cézannes' strange vibrations between figure and landscape, the way the trees bend to follow the arc of the bathers' backs. (Or is it the other way around?)

The Matisse "Bathers," two large paintings and a bronze relief, look especially striking here. The curators had hoped to obtain Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907) from the Modern, which would have evened the score, but had to make do with smaller canvases from that period and a late group of bronze sculptures ("The Bathers," 1956).

Also in this room, but on a more intimate scale, are two small Cézanne “Bathers” owned by Matisse and Jasper Johns — evidence of his hold on both artists. Matisse held onto his painting for more than three decades before giving it to the Petit Palais in Paris, saying, “It has sustained me morally in the critical moments of my venture as an artist.”



State Hermitage Museum

A matter of influence: "Apples" (1949) by Ellsworth Kelly, from the exhibition "Cézanne and Beyond," at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The curators could easily have stopped around 1945, but in a riskier move they chose to bring Cézanne into the postwar period, all the way up to the present. This part of the show, in which Cézanne landscapes mingle with paintings by Mr. Johns, Brice Marden and Mr. Kelly, looks and feels substantially different.

In Mr. Johns's "Map" paintings, you can see the basket-weave-like brushstrokes of Cézanne's views of Mont Saint-Victoire. And there's a subtle parallel between Cézanne's mountain and the targets, maps and flags described by Mr. Johns as "things the mind already knows."

It's harder, at first, to grasp the importance of Cézanne for abstract artists like Mr. Marden and Mr. Kelly. Both felt a profound attraction to him but tended to seize on isolated elements of his work: the blue-gray ocean in his views of L'Estaque for instance. A triangular blue canvas by Mr. Kelly lifts the wedge-shape sea from Cézanne's canvases; a three-banded composition by Mr. Marden tries to capture the "airy weightiness" (in this contemporary artist's words) of Cézanne's Mediterranean.

At times the show's structure overemphasizes the categories of portrait, still life and landscape, a decision that seems strange when you consider how much Cézanne destabilized these genres. In his view everything was reducible to "the cone, the sphere and the cylinder." As many writers have noted, Cézanne gave apples the same treatment as human heads (and vice versa).

Another flaw in the exhibition is its limited acknowledgment of the women influenced by Cézanne. It holds one landscape by Popova, a Russian Constructivist who became acquainted with Cézanne through the collection of the Moscow businessman Sergei Shchukin, and a photographic homage to Cézanne's "Skulls" by the appropriation artist Sherrie Levine. That's it, unless you count the catalog's brief nods to Elizabeth Murray, Sylvia Plimack Mangold and Cecily Brown.



Cézanne and Beyond

Viewers will leave with their own lists of artists who should have made the cut. (Bonnard is on mine, though his absence is excused by the Metropolitan Museum's current show of his late still lifes.) Some will also balk at the inclusion of Francis Alÿs, whose homage to Cézanne takes the form of a bubble-wrapped still life by the master. Ostensibly a substitute for the shimmering diffusion of form in Cézanne's paintings, the plastic covering will strike most people as a cop-out.

These are minor quibbles, though, considering the presence of so many outstanding paintings. The Cézannes alone — including loans from the Musée d'Orsay, the Hermitage and many private collections — are worth the trip (especially in light of the 69 works by him at the Barnes in nearby Merion). And the 600-page catalog, with essays by no fewer than 17 curators and academics, fills in many of the gray areas.

When traced back to Cézanne, many of these modern and contemporary paintings lose some of their mystique. Works by Max Beckmann, Demuth and Gorky, in particular, come to seem almost slavish.

The Cézannes, meanwhile, remain inscrutable. As Matisse said of the "Three Bathers": "In the 37 years I have owned this canvas, I have come to know it quite well, though not entirely, I hope." Or Mr. Marden, on another version of the "Bathers": "It is one of the most complex, weird paintings I have ever seen, and I can never deconstruct it: I get it and I still just don't get it."

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