

Cezanne and the Mount Sainte-Victoire: A neuroesthetic approach

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Is there a Cezanne's theory?

Cézanne dies in 1906 after making one last attempt at capturing the beauty of the Sainte-Victoire. He said about the subject of his last painting, *Le jardinier Vallier* (1906): "If I succeed in drawing this guy, it means the theory is true." What theory was he referring to? In an attempt to answer this question, four of his works are studied: *La tranchée* (Munich), *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire au Grand pin* (London), *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire* (Paris), and *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire from the Lauves* (Basel).



La tranchée



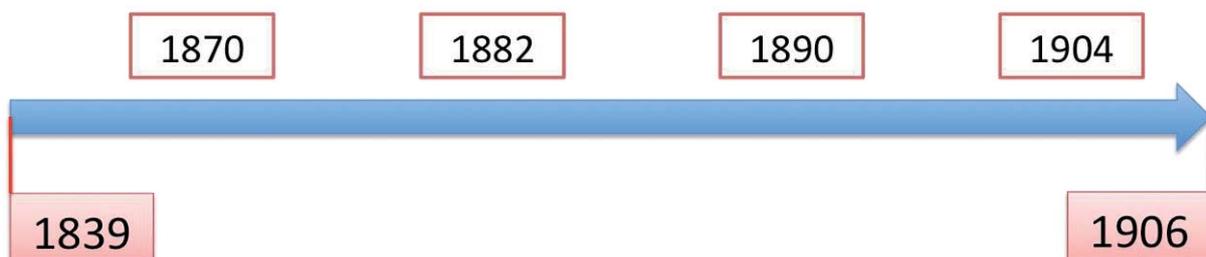
La MSV au grand pin



La MSV



La MSV vue des Lauves



1. Cezanne and the mount Sainte Victoire:

The mountain with an altogether geographical, emotional, educational, and symbolic value will ultimately become the laboratory of Cubism. Cézanne said: "Observe and learn how to see and treat nature as if it were composed of basic shapes such as cylinders, spheres, and cones."

2. Analysis of the paintings: loosing the visual strategy, mixing the colours, a taste of unfinished.

The regular visual strategy in front of a painting would be to search for an anchor point. However, in these four paintings, such anchor points cannot be found. We are lost in the Basel's painting; there only the shape and the color stimulate the eyes. In the London and Paris paintings, Cézanne uses a personal process. He puts down colors where they should not be (green and ocher in the sky), hatched brushstrokes to represent pine needles that are not even connected to the branches. Cézanne also shows a pronounced taste for the unfinished. In the Basel's work, the painting doesn't fully cover the white canvas.

2.1 What does Cezanne want?

Cézanne is a link between various artistic movements: Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, perhaps Expressionism, and certainly Abstract Art. The art of painting changes at that time for two reasons: the advent of photography (1839), and the invention of the tube paint (1840) -- artists leave their studio and paint outside. Pissarro told Cezanne: "The eye must absorb everything...do not follow rules and principles, but paint what you see and feel, and do not be inhibited by nature." From then on (1879), he became himself. "Cézanne interprets what he sees: Cezanne exceeds Impressionism. His vision is more focused on his brain than his eyes". Cézanne's hatched lines are in opposition to the pointillism of Seurat. He starts with his painting a "conversation" with the visitor's brain.

2.2 Conversation with the brain:

These colored lines stimulate the brain (Hubel-Wiesel, Nobel Prize in Physiology 1981). Brain cells respond not to points of light, but to angles, to contrast rather than brightness and to borders rather than curves. Cézanne offers a true deconstruction to the brain. He takes advantage of the fact that our visual system is sensitive to edges. The visitor's brain is the painter's partner; the brain will complete the eye's work.

2.3 The process of vision:

Cézanne is interested in the first visual step -- the image is focused and decomposed. The retina encodes the basic features of the scene (shape and color) and sends them to the visual cortex. A few milliseconds later, this information becomes a form in our visual brain (top-down processing).

3. Cézanne, “Father of Modern Art”:

Cézanne said he tried to “copy nature but failed.” This is probably because, instead of merely copying reality, he revealed the psychological process that creates it. This innovative theory would be followed by many of Cézanne’s successors (Braque, Picasso, Leger, Gris and Mondrian).

Cézanne showed us what we are unable to see; that is to say: how we see. After all, doesn’t “painting mean to think with the brush?”