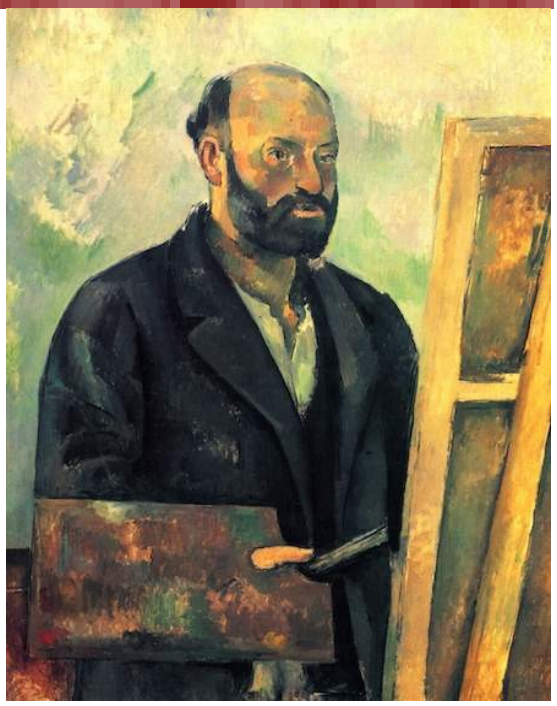
Paul Cézanne, The Father of Modernism

By Ricki Morse

(All quotations from Alex Danchev, Cézanne, a life, 2012, Random House)

In February 2022 we face a daunting touring challenge, the Van Gogh exhibition. Since we have a whole year to prepare, I can think of no better place to start than with "the father of modern art," Paul Cézanne. We certainly experience a visual connection in their thick strokes, their heavily laden brushes and palette knives, their exuberant response to nature. In a 1889 letter to his brother Theo, Van Gogh wrote, ". . . you must feel the whole of a country—isn't that what distinguishes Cézanne from anything else?"



Paul Cézanne, *Self Portrait with Palette,* 1890, oil on canvas, Buhrle Collection, Zurich, Switzerland.

Paul Cézanne was born in Aix en Provence in 1839, son of a hat maker who through clever trading in rabbit skins ultimately became a banker, a man who measured success in wealth and property. Yet from age 21 when Paul revealed his decision to become a painter, Louis-Auguste provided his son, often grudgingly, with financial support throughout the long pursuit of discovering himself as a painter. And though The Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris never accepted one of his paintings for their annual Salon, his one-man show at the Vollard Gallery in 1895 when he was 56 met wide acclaim in the art world. He was already well known among artists. Monet owned 13 Cézannes, Pissarro 21, and Gauguin often took his own favorite along to lunch to discuss with friends.

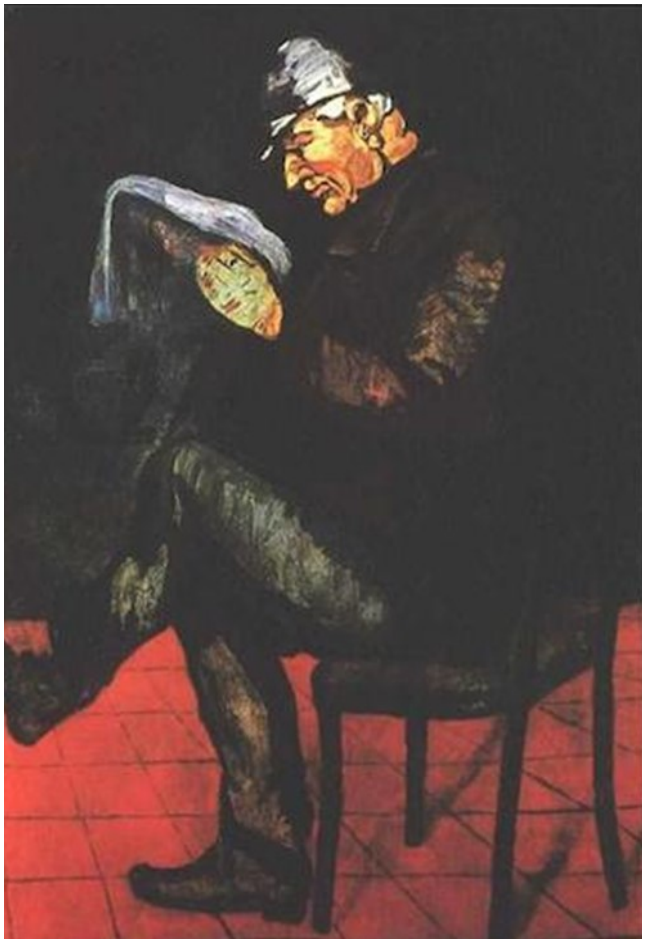
Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples and a Pot of Primroses*, 1890, oil on canvas, Metropolitan, NYC. Originally owned by Monet.

In October of 1907. . . "The most consequential exhibition of mod-

ern times opened in Paris: *Exposition Retrospective de oeuvre de Cézanne*, the first posthumous retrospective, a year after his death." The exhibition included 40 oils on canvas as well as watercolors and drawings. This still life embodies many of the discoveries Cézanne was making as he placed all his attention on what his eyes saw in the moment and the sensations he experienced. Each apple appears as a singular portrait and carries its own significance rather than being in service to the overall design. The arrangement seems random, or is it personalized? The napkin peaked among the fruit echoes Mont Sainte Victoire, providing the central triangle around which many of his paintings are organized. The shift in wall color adds dimension and drama, the sense of depth is provided by color rather than linear arrangement. The image is not still. The white tablecloth was just this moment tossed down. The wall above the fruit seems fluid while each apple is distinct, as if available to be plucked off the linen. The more we look, the more we experience.

Paul Cézanne, *The Artist's Mother*, 1866-67, oil on canvas. (On the reverse is a painting of his sister)

As a formidable, self-made man Cézanne's father, Louis-Auguste Cézanne, was given to maxims by which to live one's life, "One dies with genius, one eats with money," which he attempted to pass on to his children. At 46 Louis-Auguste had begun living with Élizabeth Aubert, 24, an employee at his hat-making firm. They had two children—Paul and his sister Marie. The children were acknowledged by Louis-Auguste, a common practice back then. Paul was nine when his parents married. Louis-Auguste soon bought out the bank that had been financing his extensive hat-making and felt-trading enterprise, thus becoming a banker. The birth of Rose completed the family. During his childhood Paul and his maternal grandmother were close, and a deeply sympathetic relationship grew between mother and son as well. She was fond of his friends and remembered by Renoir for her excellent fennel soup. Paul's parents developed a somewhat unusual marriage—his mother kept her maiden name and they often lived separately, even in the same town. She spent several summers in a seaside cottage in L'Estaque, an independent arrangement later echoed in the artist's



Paul Cezanne, *Portrait of Louis-Auguste Cézanne*, 1865, Mural transferred to canvas. National Gallery, London.

own marriage. Louis-Auguste assessed his two older children, "Paul is obsessed with painting and Marie is in league with the Jesuits." Marie never married and grew more stern with the years.

Paul's most significant early friendship began when he entered sixth grade as a day student at Collége Bourbon in Aix. Emile Zola was a boarder, a scholarship student, frail and shy, shunned by the locals for his Parisian accent. Paul was a burly boy, nearly full grown, very much a Provençal. Together the boys explored the hills and streams on the outskirts of Aix—singing Latin poetry, swimming in the streams and pools, reading Stendahl and Baudelaire's *Les Fleur du Mal*, writing their own verses, extemporizing on the beauty of girls and imagining their own futures. Zola already envisioned himself as the widely-acclaimed writer he was to become, and Paul signed up for classes at the free School of Drawing in Aix, though he was still more poet than artist. Many years later he told his son Paul (who was to become his agent), "One who is strong is Baudelaire. His *L'Art Romantique* is amazing, and he makes no mistake in the artists he appreciates." Literary studies remained enriching and supportive for Cézanne throughout his life.

Paul Cezanne, *The House of the Hanged Man*, 1873, oil on canvas, Musee D'Orsay, Paris.

When Cézanne was 20 his father bought an impressive old mansion on the outskirts of Aix, Jas de Bouffan. As it was not yet fit for occupancy, the family continued to live in their home in the city. This portrait of his father was executed as a mural in the reception hallway of Jas de Bouffan, which Cézanne always referred to as "my father's house." It was here that Louis-Auguste—after relenting on his demand that Paul earn a law degree—consented to his making a studio, including removing a portion of the roof to provide a skylight. Cézanne and Zola's intense friendship was now conducted by letter, with Zola insisting that Paul must come to Paris. In 1861 Louis-Auguste agreed, giving his son a livable stipend for an unspecified, extended period.

Paul Cézanne, *The Card Players*, 1890—92, oil on canvas, Metropolitan NYC. The framing of the cardplayers is accomplished with the blue bracketing of the scene between the standing figure and the blue-cloaked player, enhanced by the heavy gold drape and anchored In the V of the central player's legs. We are drawn into the game, enhancing the tension at the table, exuding foreboding of the outcome. Is the boy a remembrance of little Paul, who would have now been 20?

Paul found affordable lodging in the 14th Arroindessement and enrolled at Académie Suisse on the Île de la Cité, which provided studio space, materials and models, but was without teachers. It was more like a club

without entrance requirements, former students dropping by to catch up or to use the studio. Delacroix and Courbet had worked there, Manet came to draw—it was a forum on art, primarily taking sides for or against the Salon, the Parisian bastion of tradition. In later years Paul often bemoaned his lack of formal instruction, though one wonders how traditional training could have aided his path toward innovation.

Feeling unsettled in Paris he returned to Aix, beginning a lifestyle pattern which continued for decades. He applied twice to the Beaux Artes school and was rejected. In 1865 he began submitting paintings each year to the Salon, all of which were rejected, though one did slip through in 1882 attributed to another artist, but never again. Cézanne was coming to recognize that his path was distinct from that of his artist friends, that it was unique.

Cézanne, *Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory*, 1891, oil on canvas, Metropolitan, NYC.

In 1869 Cézanne met Hortense Fiquet (1850-1922), an artist's model in Paris, she 19, he 30. Intent to keep the relationship a secret from his father, they lived in his tiny apartment in Paris. Jas de Bouffan was off bounds for her while Paul's father was alive. In 1872 their son Paul was born, a delight to the artist, and the couple moved to Auvers-sur-Oise, northwest of Paris to be near his close friend, the Impressionist Camille Pissarro (1830-1903). Paul often painted his wife, even after they no longer lived together, and in this painting he places her in Jas de Bouffan. His father had died in 1886, leaving Paul a substantial inheritance which allowed Hortense to indulge in her taste for fashionable clothes and luxurious hotels in Switzerland.

Emile Bernard, *Cézanne in his studio, Les Lauves,* in front of the *Large Bathers,* 1904, photograph.

Cézanne became increasingly estranged from the Parisian world and his friends there, his focus centered on the intense search for his vision in paint. *The House of the Hanged Man* was painted in Auvers where no one knew of a hanging associated with this house, but certainly the mood of the painting is somewhat elusive, lonely. We are drawn deep into an undefined place, but we feel its depth. Pissarro, Paul's friend and neighbor at the time,

admired the painting. Matisse was drawn to the V shape structure of the terrain and houses. In 1925 he wrote, " I am very surprised that anyone can wonder whether the lesson of the painter of *The House of the Hanged Man* and *The Card Players* (below) is good or bad. If you only knew the moral strength, the encouragement that his remarkable example gave me all my life! In moments of doubt, when I was still searching for myself, frightened sometimes by my discoveries, I thought: 'If Cézanne is right, I am right.' And I knew that Cézanne had made no mistake."

Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine,* 1887, oil on canvas, Courtauld Collection, London.

When Paul's mother died in 1895, Jas de Bouffan, owned jointly by Paul, Marie and Rose was sold, at the insistence of Rose's husband. With his studio gone, Cézanne burned the paintings stored there, mostly early work except the portrait of his father, *Portrait of Louis-Auguste Cézanne*, which had been transferred to canvas and removed. Paul found himself homeless with his grief, which he shared in letters to Monet. He moved first to a small apartment in Aix and resumed his daily painting excursions outside the town. In 1901 he purchased a hilltop property with an old house on the outskirts of town with olive and fruit trees, and his spirits lightened. Named for the lava-flow hill on which it stood, Atelier des Lauves became his long dreamed-of studio, his sanctuary. He redesigned the whole second floor, including one full wall of glass overlooking the olive trees.

In the photograph (previous page), the artist sits before one of his large bathers paintings, a subject he had been pursuing since his days in Paris at the Suisse. When asked why he didn't use models, Cézanne displayed the dozens of studies, some elaborate, he had done in Paris. The painting pictured here was left unfinished, put aside and not returned to. For Cézanne, painting was not about a finished product. It was about an experience of seeing. And he often left unpainted areas within a painting, signaling that he had already achieved his goal.

Of the over 900 Cézanne oil paintings still in existence, I have seen only a few. The *Mont Sainte Victoire with Large Pine* (1887) made the greatest impression. Though he painted this landscape near his home over 60 times, the uniqueness of each reveals his process of focusing not on the scene but upon his experience of reflected color/light shapes, upon the "sensation," as he termed it. His lifetime commitment was to actualize this sensing onto canvas. In 1906 he told the young painter Maurice Denis, "I look for the light—the cylinder and the sphere; I want to make black and white with color, to recapture the confusion of sensations." Years ago as I stood in awe at the Courtauld—I could see the breeze moving through the needles of the pine. What a delight to share that now with you! ▪