

Paul Cézanne

He was born in Aix-en-Provence on January 10th, 1839, into a middle class family, and took a classical course of studies at his school in Aix and developed a strong friendship with future writer, Emile Zola. He then went on to study literature and law at his local University, but his passion for art was too strong, so he didn't complete his studies. His whole life revolved around his art and neither the social events of the times, or the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 had any effect on him.

His Influence on the Impressionists.

Many of his early works were painted in dark tones and applied with heavy, fluid pigment, suggesting a moody, romantic expressionism of the previous generations. Like Zola carried on his interest in the realist novel, Cézanne also developed a commitment to the representation of contemporary life, painting the world that he observed without a concern for stylistic affectation. Camille Pissarro an older and unrecognised painter, who lived with his large family in a rural area just outside Paris, appeared to be the most significant influence on Cézanne's work. He not only provided moral encouragement that Cézanne required (very insecure), but he also, introduced him to the new Impressionist technique for rendering outdoor light. A long with Claude Monet, August Renoir, and a few others, Pissarro had developed a painting style that involved working outdoors, rapidly and on a reduced scale, using small touches of pure colour, generally without the use of linear outlines. Within a very short time, 1872-1873 Cézanne changed from dark tones to bright hues, and began to concentrate more on scenes of farmland and other various landscapes, such as rural villages.

Cézanne's use of colour

During the 1880's and 90's he continued to paint studies from nature and in excellent Impressionist colours, but gradually, he simplified his application of the paint to the point where he seemed able to define volumetric forms with strokes of pure colour. Critics argued that Cézanne had discovered a means of rendering both nature's light and its form with a single application of colour. He seemed to be reintroducing a formal structure that the impressionists had abandoned, without sacrificing the sense of brilliant illumination they had achieved. Cézanne spoke of 'modulating' with colour, rather than 'modelling' with dark and light. By this he meant, replacing an artificial convention of representation, with a more expressive system (modulating) that was still closer nature or as Cézanne said, 'parallel to nature.' But for Cézanne the answer to all of the technical problems of Impressionism lay in a use of colour more orderly and more expressive than that of his fellow Impressionists. His goal, in his own mind, was never fully attained. He left most of his works unfinished and destroyed many others, he also complained of his failure at rendering the human figure, and the great figural works of his last years, such as the Large Bathers (I have a picture), and he revealed curious distortions that seemed to have been dictated by the stubbornness of the system of colour modulation he imposed on his own representations. However the heirs of Cézanne felt that the naturalistic painting of Impressionism had become formulaic, and a new and original style, however difficult it might be, was needed to return a sense of sincerity and commitment to modern art.

Significance of Cézanne's work

For many years only his old Impressionist colleagues and a few younger radical Postimpressionists, including Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh and French painter Paul Gauguin, knew Cézanne. However, in 1885, a man named Ambroise Vollard, an ambitious Paris art dealer arranged a show of Cézanne's works, and over the next few years promoted them successfully. By 1904, Cézanne was featured in a major official exhibition, and by the time of his death, Aix October 22, 1906 he had attained the status of a legendary figure. During his last years many younger artists travelled to Aix to observe him at work and to receive many words of wisdom he might offer. Both his style and theory remained mysterious and cryptic; he seemed to some a naïve primitive, while to others he was a sophisticated master of technical procedure. The intensity of his colour, along with the apparent stubbornness of his compositional organisation, signalled to most that, despite the artist's own frequent despair, he had synthesised the basic expressive and representational elements of painting in a highly original manner