

University of New Mexico

UNM Digital Repository

2023 Award Winners

Jim & Mary Lois Hulsman Undergraduate
Library Research Award

Fall 2022

Cezanne's Colors, Lines, and Perspectives of Mont Saint Victoire

Daniel L. Feng

University of New Mexico, danfeng1357@unm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/ugresearchaward_2023

Recommended Citation

Feng, Daniel L.. "Cezanne's Colors, Lines, and Perspectives of Mont Saint Victoire." (2022).
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/ugresearchaward_2023/4

This Emerging Researcher is brought to you for free and open access by the Jim & Mary Lois Hulsman Undergraduate Library Research Award at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2023 Award Winners by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Mont Saint Victoire, Cezanne's View from Above, and his Impacts on Our Perception of Afar

Daniel Feng

ARTH 1120

Instructor Norwood

Paul Cezanne's *Mont Saint Victoire*, a painting of a landscape depicting a large mountain looming over a small village near a riverbank, was first painted in 1882 seen from Bellevue during the Post-Impressionist period of art in France.¹ (Figure 1) Near the foreground of the painting are tall pine trees, shrubs, bushes, and other various types of vegetation. Being close to 2 feet tall and 3 feet wide, this small but elegant painting utilizes a brilliant pallet of colors and a masterful use of formal elements such as linear perspective, shape and proportion, to display a multitude of different scenes into a small space. Throughout Cezanne's life, *Mont Saint Victoire* would develop an ethos as the artist would continue to master his stylistic depictions, illustrating the mountainous landscape in dozens of different ways, each one different yet no less compelling than the last, and how they were received by the public would shape our perception of Cezanne to this very day.

"I paint as I see, as I perceive" Paul Cezanne stated in 1870 as he spoke in "Le Salon".² Cezanne's unique style of painting his portraits still lives, and landscapes stem from his depiction of space on the canvas. Our everyday motion throughout our lives influences the appearance of the colors, lines, and features of the painting, and consequentially, alters our perception of the painting.³ French philosopher Merleau Ponty describes that this phenomenon invokes a dynamic perspective of an observers experience as they shift from one perspective to the next: in short, no single, static view can fully envelop what Cezanne is trying to portray in his paintings, but a multitude of perspectives and angles can reveal the full extent of the paintings.⁴

¹ Françoise Cachin, Isabelle Cahn, Walter Feilchenfeldt, Henri Loyrette and Joseph J. Rishel, *Cezanne* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995-1996) 253.

² Paul Smith, "Cézanne's "Primitive" Perspective, or the "View from Everywhere"" *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (March 2013), 102.

³ Ibid, 103.

⁴ Ibid.

In the earlier phases of his career, Cezanne chose to paint *Mont Saint Victoire* in a more concrete and elucidated manner, using a specific style of brushwork. Figure 1 shows the dexterous brushwork creating a flattened atmosphere while simultaneously invoking a panorama-like sense of space.⁵ Art historian Meyer Schapiro analyzes the effects of Cezanne's linework. Using diagonal lines, Cezanne creates a vanishing point near the upper edge of the painting.⁶ In the background a giant mountain towers over the landscape. The mountain is divided in two by a thin pine tree that punctuates the center of the picture plane.⁷ This use of space creates a contrast between the trees in the foreground, the river and arches in the middle ground, and the sky and mountain in the background. Through a clever usage of lines and linear perspective, Cezanne has drawn our attention from the river below, up to the pines, and finally focusing our gaze on Mount Saint Victoire. The ability to use multiple perspectives of various landscapes and incorporate them into his paintings helped Cezanne stand out in the Post-Impressionist period of art.

Cezanne's usage of color for paintings of this location would evolve over time, giving Mont Saint Victoire a vibrant and dynamic pallet that he would continue to use and develop in his many versions of the landscape. Figure 2 portrays a painting of the same location, created some 20 years after the original. Here, Cezanne uses a completely different color and medium from what is seen in Figure 1. He also emphasizes different formal elements and a different medium: watercolor and pencil instead of oil on canvas. In this painting, Cezanne chose to utilize what painter Roger Fry called "nodal points", in which color is used to suggest forms in space, giving the painting a more profound structure.⁸ Being more translucent than oil on canvas, the watercolors

⁵ Ibid, 259.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Susana Level, "Cezanne's "Mont Saint Victoire"" *The Museum of Modern Art* No. 2 (Winter, 1974-1975), 2.

reveal more layers, and a more sophisticated depiction is developed with this new medium. Mixing dark blue paints with lighter patches, Cezanne has created an image of the mountain, a heavy mass of stone, that appears to float over the landscape below.

Throughout his art career, Paul Cezanne painted over 900 oil paintings and 400 watercolor paintings. 20 years after the original painting of *Mont Saint Victoire*, near the end of his life, he would return to the green hills and once again, paint the landscape of a mountain towering over a river and a pine forest. In some of Cezanne's final years, *Mont Saint Victoire* would be reimagined again. The later paintings of *Mont Saint Victoire* some 20 years after his originals were clearly done in a different style than his earlier versions. Upon comparing a painting from an earlier period with a painting from a later period, one of the more obvious differences between the two is Cezanne's choice of linework in the landscape's shapes. The landscape and mountain depicted in Figure 3, painted 1902-1904, is far more abstract and geometric than the more natural landscapes of earlier paintings. Additionally, the colors are more non-naturalistic and dynamic than those in Figure 1, but rather blotches of greens and yellows characterize the lush landscape below, while blue and white blotches occupy the space in the foreground where the mountain is located. With each version, his use of color becomes more saturated and less blended, drawing attention to his brushwork. His bold brushwork, and the uncertainty of the shapes and features of the painting allows the viewer to fully engage with the painting and image it in a myriad of different ways. Cezanne's usage of light pencil sketches coupled by watercolors in Figure 2 lifts the mountain in the foreground away from the surface below, along with the purples, greens, pinks,

and other colors that contrast yet blend in so well with the white canvas, juxtaposing from the more uniform and natural paintings of Figure 1.⁹

The paintings described above portray Cezanne's artwork as a Post-Impressionist pioneer who was able to repaint the same landscape in different styles, but how does the painting stand up in context of when they were painted? What did other artists, the public, and even you, say about it?

Mont Saint Victoire was painted in France during the late nineteenth century, a time in which the Post-Impressionist period of art took hold of fine arts and paintings. First coined by Roger Fry in 1906, Post-Impressionism can be described as a movement against the naturalistic norms of Impressionism, as well as the exploration of color, line, and form to express works of art.¹⁰ Although the term was first used the very year Cezanne would pass away, he was a major pioneer of the genre, along with Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and many more.¹¹ Aside from the selections of *Mont Saint Victoire*, Cezanne would also paint a wide variety of Post-Impressionist paintings, ranging from *Pyramid of Skulls* in Figure 4 to *Cardplayers* in Figure 5. As for Cezanne himself, he saw his painting to express sensations not just from personal experiences, but to *show* the audience what messages he was trying to convey in his paintings.¹² Moreover, his "lived perspective"—as Merleau Ponty would describe it—was another way Cezanne expressed his paintings as objects that shift through space and time as the viewer carefully

⁹ Robert Morris, "Cezanne's Mountains", *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1998), 816.

¹⁰ J. P. H. House, "Post-Impressionist Visions of Nature", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* Vol. 128, No. 5289 (AUGUST 1980), 568-569.

¹¹ Lionello Venturi, "The Early Style of Cezanne and Post-Impressionists", *Parnassus* Vol. 9, No. 3 (Mar. 1937), 15.

¹² Paul Smith, "Cézanne's "Primitive" Perspective, or the "View from Everywhere"" *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (March 2013), 102.

observed the features of his paintings.¹³ This implies that his paintings give off an ununified atmosphere because they were painted with the intention that objects can be characterized differently from different perspectives, even if the painting itself seems to embody a more static form. As Cezanne would put it, “They created pictures; we are attempting a piece of nature.”¹⁴

Whether or not the intended effects of Cezanne’s paintings landed, the public perception of his artworks and the artist himself were very polarizing. Some praised him for being a “truly extraordinary” artist and “a modern saint,” while others scorned him for being “an ignorant Dauber,” or having “a love of ugliness”.¹⁵ Some described his paintings as pitiable, revealing Cezanne’s ignorance in drawing, composition, color, and the usage of other artistic elements in paintings; only good at provoking laughter and nothing else.¹⁶ Others accused him of reaching “the extreme limit of intransigence,” unwilling to change his own views about anything.¹⁷ Henri Rochefort even went as far as to describe Cezanne and other artists such as Pissarro and Claude Monet as having “sick brains, inside-out souls, squinty-eyed types, and cripples...”¹⁸ On the other hand, he also received praise for being the driving force behind the artistic movement at the time: Georges Lecomte saw Cezanne as one who “exercised a notable influence on the Impressionist evolution” and he was esteemed as a “Precursor of Another Art.”¹⁹ Paul Signac complimented Cezanne’s painting style, stating how by juxtaposing his line works without concern of imitations or concreteness, he came closer to the “methodical *division* of the Neo-Impressionists” than

¹³Ibid, 106.

¹⁴ Robert Morris, “Cezanne’s Mountains”, *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1998), 814-829.

¹⁵ Françoise Cachin, Isabelle Cahm, Walter Feilchenfeldt, Henri Loyrette and Joseph J. Rishel, *Cezanne* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995-1996) 25, 32, 36.

¹⁶ Ibid, 25.

¹⁷ Ibid, 26.

¹⁸ Ibid, 36.

¹⁹ Ibid, 30.

anyone ever before.²⁰ Julius Meier-Graefe hoisted him along with Van Gogh as a hero of contemporary painting, and Hans Rosenhagen even went as far as to call Cezanne a “pure, uncorrupted man” with a great artistic taste whom, “even in the least of his works...is the best proof of his greatness”.²¹

Cezanne and his artworks may have been controversial for his time, but they’ve stood the test of time and are still being discussed today, over a century later. Whether or not *Mont Saint Victoire* had any great influence on his reputation amongst the artists and public audience of his time is arbitrary. What matters now is what you, the viewer, make of his usage of divergent perspectives to create a dynamic scenery of a mountain towering over a forest landscape. Paul Cezanne not only painted a scene of a mountain towering over a landscape, but he painted *multiple* scenes of the same mountain looming over the town and river with pines trees in the foreground to add a special sense of the forest. His masterful selection of colors and utilization of linear perspective, vanishing points, and other formal elements successfully creates an image that has a different identity when viewed from certain angles. Moreover, the audience reception of the artwork has greatly influenced our thinking of his painting and himself, as many still consider Cezanne to be an influential pioneer of the Post-Impressionist movement. While his reputation of his day might’ve been quite mixed, that doesn’t mean one cannot admire his works of artworks in the modern era nearly a century after his death. In the words of Cezanne himself, “Will I reach the goal so long sought after?”.²² Perhaps you could be the one to fulfill his goal, and recognize him as a leader in art.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 36.

²² Françoise Cachin, Isabelle Cahn, Walter Feilchenfeldt, Henri Loyrette and Joseph J. Rishel, *Cezanne* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995-1996) 17.

Illustrations



Figure 1. Paul Cezanne, *Mont Sainte Victoire*, c. 1882-1885, oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 32 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Cachin, *Cezanne*, 253)

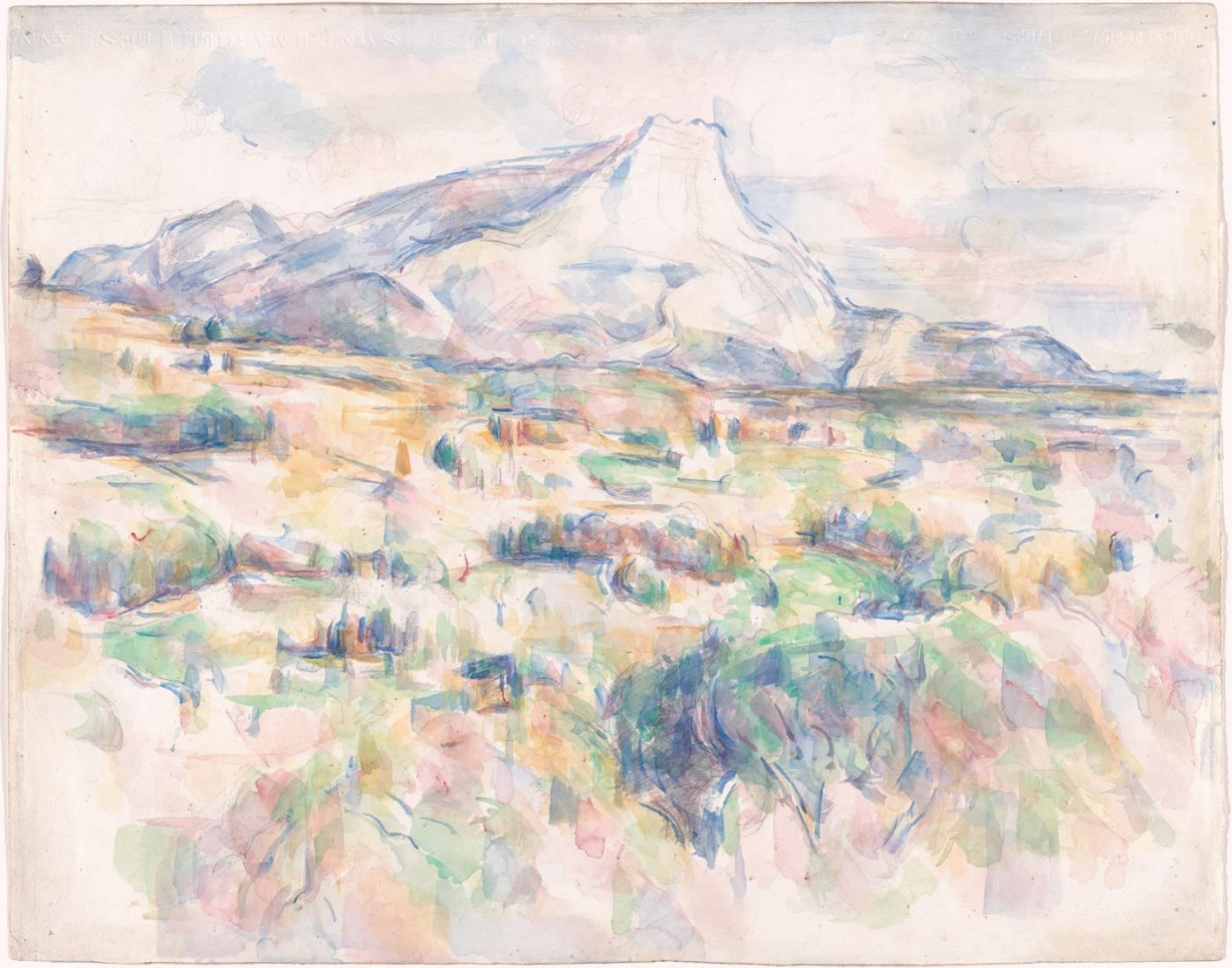


Figure 2. Paul Cezanne, *Mont Saint Victoire*, c. 1902-1906, watercolor and pencil, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Gift of David Rockefeller (Museum of Modern Art)



Figure 3. Paul Cezanne, *Mont Saint Victoire*, c. 1902-1904, oil on canvas, 27 ½ x 35 ¼ inches,
Philadelphia Museum of Art (Cachin, *Cezanne*, 475)



Figure 4. Paul Cezanne, *Pyramid of Skulls*, c. 1898-1900, oil on canvas, 15 3/8 x 18 3/8 inches,
Private Collection (Cachin, *Cezanne*, 491)



Figure 5. Paul Cezanne, *Cardplayers*, c. 1893-1896, oil on canvas, 18 11/16 x 22 7/16 inches, Musee d'Orsay, Paris (Cachin, *Cezanne*, 339)