Paul Cézanne occupies an unusual position in the history of art: a painter who in his lifetime experienced only incomprehension of his art and a plethora of scorn but who has been claimed by many modern movements. On the one hand, Cézanne was mocked and ridiculed, was treated as a madman and a barbarian, and he had no disciple in his own time. On the other hand, he is today revered as the father of modern art, as the inspiration for countless artists; and he is idolized by almost every major critic.

Despite the praise, the range of interpretations of Cézanne’s art is vast; and in general, the criticism of his art is plagued by a great deal of misreading of his theories and by narrowness of perspective. For example, several stages can be detected during his lifetime and subsequently. In the nineteenth century, critics conditioned by scientific naturalism saw in his work only a reaction to or departure from the immediate past and present. They characterized the unexpected aspects of his art as brutal, gauche, childish, and primitive. The criticism was generally negative and focused on characteristics which the next generation critics, writing after the artist’s death, considered as positive elements of his style. It is interesting to note that terms like “brutal” became synonymous with “rugged” or “powerful”; and “primitive” and “childish” were absorbed into the concept of Cézanne as the pioneer and forerunner of modern art. What was awkward, unskilled, or gauche to nineteenth century eyes, now became a conscious “will to distortion.” These “distortion” later became the foundation of formalistic art criticism of the artist (based on Bell’s and Fry’s “significant form”). Critics subsequent to Bell and Fry undertook a rigorous analysis of Cézanne’s distortions in terms of the abstract formal structure of his work. From about 1910 on, he was largely interpreted as the master of a three-dimensional geometric expression achieved through as exhaustive study of forms in space and their presentation in...
planes of color. He now became valued, not solely as the rebel who released art from its representational function, but as the source for abstract, and most particularly for Cubist, art.¹

Cézanne legacy to the future is the central issue of this dissertation and the object of critical reevaluation. Stressing his repudiation of Impressionism and naturalism, critics and theorists, who see some kind of evolutionary connection between him and Cubism, assume that his rejection of these nineteenth-century styles corresponds to a rejection of representation in art. As a result, his use of color, space, line, brushwork, modeling, etc. has become a point of contention in the contemporary criticism of the artist, particularly among the critics who value his art solely in terms of the plastic achievements he conveyed to the twentieth century. His unique manner of rendering his subjects caused critics to become more and more concerned with the way in which he intentionally transposed and rearranged (i.e., distorted) the “facts” of nature into the components of a work of art (i.e., his style) than with the way in which he created a valid representation of his experience of reality in aesthetic form. The step from Cézanne’s abstract late paintings and watercolors to Cubism is seen as a logical developments of his theories and discoveries—nature recedes into abstraction, the ultimate victory of form over subject matter.

While many of Cézanne’s critics do not openly compare the artist with the Cubist movement, they tend to describe his works in such a way that it is difficult to believe that they did not have Cubism in mind. The question is whether Cézanne in his late works was merely simplifying and omitting more detail or whether he was truly shifting to a purely nonrepresentational play of forms. Some critics emphasize his geometrical volumes or patterns as examples of his deliberate departure from of “distortion” of anything “natural” in the interest of geometry for its own sake. It is apparently assumed that a geometrization of form is irreconcilable with the representation of reality. Other critics, who mention Cubism specifically in the discussion of Cézanne’s “abstractions,” maintain that there exists a direct line of influence between the artist and his Cubists descendants. In their designation of him as the father and precursor of the movement
they imply a consciousness on the part of the artist that this would have been the ultimate “realization” of his aims and struggles, if only he had lived to fulfil them.

Several factors account for the insistent and misguided opinion: a belief in the art-historical process as an inevitable evolution according to intrinsically meaningful laws (such as a solution of formal problems), the inability to evaluate the artist and his work with unbiased pre-Cubist eyes, and the equally invalid literal interpretation of two of the artist’s own statements. These are the remarks concerning the “cylinder, the cone, and the sphere” and the statement “I am the primitive of a new art. I am convinced I will have followers.” These have often been used to support a view of Cézanne art that arose after his death. On the basis of radical misinterpretation of these statements, critics accuse Cézanne of rearranging nature and distorting perspective merely in order to make geometric patterns in three-dimensional space. It was but a short step to pure abstraction, already indicated in his late works (particularly the landscapes): “Paul Cézanne is the fountain-head of many of the movements of modern art…out of his theory that nature could be reduced to the cube, the cone, the cylinder came Cubism: out of his insistence that what he painted were his sensations in the presence of nature came Expressionism and other ‘isms’.” “He called increasingly on geometry to second his vision and built on the firm foundation he had detected in nature himself: the cylinder, the cone, and the sphere.” “It is fascinating to entertain the possibility that, he lived a decade longer…he himself might have ‘invented’ Cubism…those late abstract landscapes and the sphere-cone-cylinder principle constitute the source to which, a generation thence, Picasso and Braque turned and the base on which were predicted their Cubist experiments.”

“Borrowing the principles of their doctrine from him, the Cubists were the ones to fulfill the intentions of Cézanne and to extend them to their ultimate consequences. They were the ones to treat nature truly ‘by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone,’ logically developing the greatest discovery that a painter had made since Paolo Uccello…Cézanne was thus the father of
Cubism.”

“It is above all the Cubism, and from there to abstract painting in its entirety, that the art of Cézanne seems to have given the impetus... because he had written to Emile Bernard to treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere and the cone, Cézanne was to become the point of departure for those theories that progressively tore painting away from figuration and that launched modern art on the road it has since followed.”

The majority of critics seem to agree that Cézanne’s abstract geometry owes little to formal relationships in nature. Rather, they “interpret” it as a reflection of a predilection for the play of volumes and rhythms in space as they fluctuate between surface and depth. The various paintings of the renowned Mt. Sainte-Victoire are seen as a succession of increasingly abstract works faceting and dissolution of form point provocatively to Cubism.

In addition to geometrization, faceting of planes, surface patterning, and various other compositional distortions, Cézanne’s awareness of the flatness of the two-dimensional picture plane stands apart as a major contribution to Cubism. Critic Clement Greenberg, one of the more ardent contemporary exponents of the Cubist theory, proposes that Cézanne progressed from a literal rendition of the illusion of the third dimensions to the configuration of the picture itself as an object or flat surface. Flatness, of course, need not compromise the representations of reality, as the art of the Byzantine, Carolingian, or Gothic periods demonstrates (although these are non-naturalistic conceptions). Alois Riegel states that “every art-style aims at the faithful reproduction of nature and nothing else, but each has its own mode of apprehending nature.”

Greenberg’s use of the term “literal” is ambiguous in any case, for Egyptian painting respects a flat surface whose “literal” nature did not necessitate the illusion of the third dimension. Nevertheless, Greenberg states: “Once 'human interest' had been excluded, every visual sensation produced by the subject became equally important. Both the picture as picture, and space as space, became tighter and tauter.” Greenberg erroneously assumes here that Cézanne’s treatment of objects as having equal importance in the picture space implies a rejection of
“human interest” or subject matter. He feels that the medium itself is responsible for a
development that led to the recognition of the shape and position of the flat rectangle which was
being covered with pigment (something that is true of most historic painting which is
representational). Nevertheless, Greenberg feels that it is this element in the works of the last ten
to fifteen years of Cézanne’s life which led to the discovery of Cubism: “The illusion of depth is
constructed with the surface plane more vividly and the facet planes may jump back and forth
between the surface and the images they create, yes they are one with both surface and image.”

Erle Loran provides support for Greenberg’s cubistic descriptions with his emphasis on
multiple eye levels in one picture; on the shattered intersecting planes; and on the play and
tension between axes throughout a painting, as his detailed diagrams attempt to reveal. “Still
Life with Basket of Fruit…the last distortion explained in the diagram recalls Cézanne’s habit of
tipping the vertical axes continues throughout the entire painting…the conflict and dualism of
static and dynamic axes, the plane tensions resulting from the shifting of eye levels, the action of
three-dimensional space forced to maintain its relation to the picture plane-these are the elements
of the inner life of Cézanne’s art.”

Although somewhat exaggerated, this statement need not conflict with Cézanne’s
representational intentions. It ignores the possibility that for Cézanne these devices were the
instruments by which he could make images look more real and convincing (compared to what
he considered the lifeless quality of naturalism with its slavish imitation of reality). Instead,
Loran and Greenberg justify their ideas of evolutionary development by exploiting the
contradictions between Cézanne’s statements and his art. As Greenberg states, “I prefer to think
with Erle Loran…that the master himself was more than a little confused in his theorizing about
his art. But did he not complain that Bernard, with his appetite for theories, forced him to
theorize unduly?”
Further rationalization is provided by Cézanne’s lamentations regarding his failure or inability to “realize” his sensations and his premonition that he was the “primitive of a new art.” It will be shown that, to the contrary, Cézanne’s own statements actually reveal his intentions as those of a representational painter. It is ironic that the work of an artist supposedly so preoccupied with integrating Impressionism with the solidity of construction and with spatial illusion could lead, within a few years of that artist’s death, to a kind of painting as flat as that of the Gothic era.

The arguments presented by theorists postulating the progression of Cézanne’s art from incompetent representation to formalistic abstraction to its culmination in Cubism bring to mind the “destination model” of period styles. In order to account for the innate dynamic of style, James Ackerman states that all of the major theories have been determinist in the sense that they define a preordained pattern of “evolution”: the earlier phase of a style is “destined” to move toward the later. If the destiny of styles had evolved as projected, then those works of art that promote evolution (such as from Cézanne to Cubism) are destiny fulfilling and those that do not are destiny denying. Placing Cézanne’s late work in the dormer category immediately denotes a value judgement, the implication being that the chief function of any work of art is to contribute toward the words that follow it in a sequence; and the greater the contribution the more “significant” the work.

Though the purpose of this dissertation is neither to deny “significance” to the art of Paul Cézanne nor to deny that in retrospect his influence on Cubism is undisputable, it is nevertheless important to demonstrate that his legacy should not by itself determine his role in the history of art. Should Cézanne be considered any less important if he were merely as artist representative of his time in the late nineteenth century, in the tradition of representational conventions; an artist very much inspired by the art of the past? Ackerman is again instructive here:
We cannot erase our image of the totality of a style process in the past, but this need not discourage us from trying to interpret a work of art in terms of its proper context rather than its effect by gaining perspectives within the process at points short of its termination... given our habits of hindsight, it is necessary to add that he [the artist] is not aware of the works that will follow his; he knows only past and present. He accepts and rejects aspects of what he finds in things about him and he adds something of his own. By this choice and by his contribution he moves a step – sometimes a leap – away from the past. Are we, then, justified in saying that he has moved toward the future?13

The artist, then, may happen to contribute to the future, but only by having concentrated primarily on making something intrinsically worthwhile in the present. What is called evolution in the arts should therefore not be described as a succession of steps toward a solution to a given problem but as a succession of steps away from one or more original statements of a problem. Each step, for the artist who takes it, is a probe that reaches to the limits of his imagination; he cannot consciously make a transition to a succeeding step, for if he visualizes something he regards as preferable to what he is doing, he presumably will proceed to do it. We cannot properly speak of a sequence of solutions to a given problem, since with each solution the nature of the problem changes.

Arnold Hauser concurs with this view in his Philosophy of Art History when he warns against mechanistic conceptions of history and claims that a style comes into being and develops gradually as the result of a dialectic between the works that are in progress at the moment and those which already exist and are influential. And just as the true meaning and the success or failure of a work of art remain open questions and the goal of doubtful struggle until the last finishing touch has been applied, so we can hardly tell where a style will lead until it has finished
its course and spoken its last word. Hauser further maintains that though works of art acquire historical meaning in relationship to works that have gone before and that come after, it has no bearing on the artist’s intentions or on the aesthetic apprehension of individual works. He warns that art history is in great danger of becoming a mere history of forms and problems. Let it once yield to this danger and not only the individual works and the personalities of the artists but also the historical situation, with the particular conditions of life obtaining, will come to seem more or less irrelevant. Art history is concerned in the main with trends and movements in the field of art; yet the only artistic reality is the works of art. All concepts are risky abstractions if they go beyond the single, individual, concrete object of an aesthetic experience in order to embrace a number of different works in some later style.

Hauser’s admonition that a work of art can become just as illustration of problems of forms seems to have gone unheeded by the adherents of the viewpoint that Cézanne was consciously paving the way toward complete abstraction. It must be remembered that Cézanne was never completely abstract, however simplified some canvasses may appear to those unfamiliar with his motifs. Though he eliminated what he felt to be nonessential, he never renounced representation or attempted to manipulate visual reality in the manner of the Cubists. All artists are to a degree involved in “formal problems;” however, this must not be admired as the exclusive interest of an artist like Cézanne.

E.H. Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* points out that these kind of assumptions can occur when complete fidelity to a current form of “objective” visual experience becomes both a moral and an aesthetic imperative, as was the case in the late nineteenth century. Cézanne had realized, that if one were faithful to one’s localized vision of every detail of surfaces, the equation would not work out, i.e., in the end the elements would not fuse into a convincing whole. New principles of selection, emphasis, and organization had to be designed to express nature when seen as a unified architecture of volumes. Thus, for Gombrich, style rules even where the artist wishes to
reproduce nature faithfully from an integral point of view. Moreover, “the artists, clearly, can render only what his toll and his medium are capable of rendering His technique restricts his freedom of choices.”

Apparently, the key to the misinterpretation of Cézanne’s method is found in his relationship to traditional concepts of space. His disregard of the rules of scientific perspective and his rearrangement of forms to solve particular pictorial problems that did not coincide with traditional methods were clear indications to critics conditioned by naturalism that Cézanne was consciously distorting his vision of things in a proto-Cubist manner. Loran and others fail to realize that this disregard for “infallible pictorial perspective” is seen in the work of many great representational painters, whether it be in the constructive of the human anatomy or in the arbitrary use of cast shadows or in different eye levels.

An analysis of the problems inherent in the formalist or Cubist approach to Cézanne’s art suggests that, once it has been recognized that the invariable role of the medium influences the representation of visual reality, Cézanne’s formal concerns (such as his innovations with space and perspective or his fascination with geometric volumes) become manifestations of a stylistic preference rather than of a conscious will to distortion. Cézanne did not begin with a prefixed stylistic framework which he imposed on nature. Rather, he began with nature, looking at it with scrutiny and recognizing its inherent individuality. He exploited its particular characteristics to develop a style which, he felt, corresponded as closely as possible to his aesthetic perception of nature, however much in a non-naturalistic manner. Cézanne was constantly grappling with the problem of the relation between the natural and the pictorial world and to him nature and art were connected, though not in the strict model-copy relationship of scientific naturalism. Nature always supplied the grounds for his art, whose function it was to comment on the natural world within the limits of its own multiple possibilities rather than to describe “mere outward appearances.”
It has been stated that Cubist theory takes its primary source as inspiration from the much-abused quotation concerning the cylinder, the cone, and the sphere which is often cited as presaging Cubism. But the statement instead clearly denotes a method of constructing space to recover the solidity lost by the Impressionists; it in no way compromised Cézanne’s original representational intentions. Though some of his late paintings and watercolors did become simplified and abstract when compared to earlier works, they never lost contact with the motif. Purely abstract or nonobjective art would have been alien to Cézanne for it would have denied the fidelity to nature which was his lifelong inspiration. Therefore, any features in Cézanne’s art that one might describe “cubistic” are products of his communication with nature, and any stylistic transformations he may exhibit serve to express a personal visual experience.

For the Cubists, Cézanne’s remark that all forms in nature can be reduces to the cylinder, the cone, and the sphere apparently had becomes end in itself rather than simply geometry of nature was taken literally and seriously by a generation of artists too susceptible to theories of evolutionary development and lacking in a careful observation of the works themselves. An examination of Cézanne’s statements about L’Estaque, which inspired a group of paintings singled out as particularly proto-Cubist, shows the way in which theories and art historians ignore not only the visual evidence but the written as well.

‘As you say,’ Cézanne wrote from L’Estaque to Zola, ‘there are some very beautiful views from here. The difficulty is to reproduce them… I began to perceive nature late, though this does not prevent it being full of interest to me.’ A letter to Picasso reveals the strong emotion aroused by Cézanne by the view of the beautiful bay of L’Estaque: ‘It is like a playing car. Red roofs on the blue sea. The sum is so terrifying that it seems as though the objects are silhouetted, not only in black and
white, but in blue, red, brown and violet. I may be mistaken, but is seems to me the very opposite of modeling.\textsuperscript{15}

From this example, it may be said that Cézanne’s flattening of pictorial space is based upon a motif in nature as flat to his eye as a playing card; and his use of line or drawing is a direct response to the silhouetted forms outlined by the intense light of the Mediterranean sun. As a result, his divergence from the purely plastic orientation of Cubism becomes apparent.

Whereas the Cubists reduced Cézanne’s aesthetic to a formula, forcing his procedures into molds of abstractions that stress geometrical patterning, Cézanne’s attention was primarily on nature. Other than the obvious fact that there are no pure “cylinders, cones, and spheres” in his paintings, which many see as Cubistic elements are, in fact, motifs from reality itself. Unlike the Cubists who superimposed a geometric framework on reality, Cézanne started with reality, in which he perceived geometrical relationships between forms, and developed a corresponding pictorial representation. Critics like Erle Loran and Clement Greenberg, who devalue Cézanne’s relationship to nature in order to play up his modernism, ignoring the role of nature simply because their limited conception of art history as an evolutionary process (in accordance with the “destination model”) allows them to perceive in his work only an artful design of planes instead of valid representations of nature. If Cubism had never developed, would Cézanne still be appreciated today as a modernist? Undoubtedly many such critics would find him less exciting and revolutionary.

Despite Cézanne’s rule as the “father” of modern art, persistently acknowledged by subsequent generations of painters and critics, it is imperative to maintain that his influence on such a movement as Cubism does not necessarily have any bearing on his own intentions. Categories and labels are superficial at best and are convenient only for the purposes of evolutionary art history. His art is not simple continuation of previous movements, nor is it a revolutionary
reversal that leads directly to Cubism and abstract art. However innovation his pictorial structure may appear to those with a preconceived mental image of what a representation of reality ought to be, it must be seen as a valid alternative mode of translating his visual experience of nature in terms of the particular medium employed. Cézanne’s art, like a “second nature,” is able to capture the essence of Provence, albeit in a more “modern” pictorial language than the nineteenth century had previously known.
End Notes


2. In a letter to Emile Bernard of April 15, 1904: “May I repeat what I told you here: treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything in proper perspective so that each side of an object or a plane is directed toward a central point…” Nochlin, Linda, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874-1904* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966), pp.91-92.

3. “I am… the primitive of a new art…but if they try to create a school in my name, tell them that have never understood or liked what I have done.” Boisdeffre, *et al.*, *Cézanne* (Paris: Hachette, 1966), p 265.

4. “Aspects of French Painting from Cézanne to Picasso, January 15 to March 2, 1941” (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1941).


10. Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (New York: Knopf 1959), p. 223. Hauser comments on Rigel as follows: “Thus nature also takes on a historical character; not only do the means of representing it change, but the task it presents to the artist also change. It is
therefore senseless to speak of naturalistic and unrealistic styles; for there can be no question of getting closer to or farther away from the nature, but only of adopting one or another conception of nature.”


12. Loran, Erle Cézanne’s Composition (Berkeley: University of California, 1959) p.77.

13. James Ackerman, “Style,” Art and Archaeology (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 173. He continues: “The pattern of style change, then, is not determined by any destiny or by a common goal, but by a succession of complex decisions as numerous as the works by which we have define style. We can detect a pattern or distinguish a common problem because each decision in turn, by its choice of elements that are to be retained or rejected, and by its innovations, gives to the whole a determinable configuration. The configuration may appear purposeful or predestined because each successive work retains something of those that precede it and because its innovations, though not anticipated in earlier works, are coherently related to them. But what actually motivates the process is a constant incidence of probing’s into the unknown, not a sequence of steps toward the perfect solution” (p. 175).

14. E. H. Gombrich, Art of Illusion (New York: Phaidon, 1968), p. 65. “The features and relationships, the pencil picks out will differ from those the brush can indicate. Sitting in front of his motif, pencil in hand, the artist will, therefore, look for those aspects which can be rendered in lines…while in brush in hand, he sees in terms of masses.”

15. “The most serious critical error is not to have labeled Cézanne a Symbolist, Neo-impressionist, mystic, Neo-classic or Cubist: it is to have proclaimed that he was the precursor of every tendency that followed him, a great precursor, but only a precursor.” Venturi, Cézanne: son art, son oeuve, pp. 14-15.
16. Recently, a debate has arisen concerning the origins of Cubism. Although the point of contention is the relationship between Picasso and Braque as originators of the movement, the debate has some relevance for the issue at hand. Leo Steinberg in “Resisting Cézanne” (Art In America, Nov.-Dec., 1978), and an appendix, “The Polemical Part” (Art In America, Mar.-Apr., 1979) challenges the view of William Rubin that Braque should receive credit for the earliest form of Cubism (Cézanne: The Late Work [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977]). William Rubin’s rebuttal (“Pablo and Georges and Leo and Bill,” in Art in America, Mar.-Apr., 1979) insist that the evolution of Analytic Cubism was as unprecedented dual enterprise on the part of Picasso and Braque, but one nonetheless initiate by Braque’s response to Cézanne. In the course of the discussion on the historical and creative origins of Cubism after all. There is no direct line of continuity in that Braque came from Cubism (albeit through Cézanne) after a Fauvist beginning. Furthermore, Rubin has taken great care to demonstrate that many elements associated with the structure and morphology of Cubism are not used consistently by Cézanne. In fact, in order to create a new concept, Braque had to abstract and conceptually transform many of Cézanne’s pictorial devices into a more regularized syntax that structured early Cubism (Analytic). Braque’s interpretation of Cézanne is what gave Picasso his insight into the master, but it was the former’s works around 1908 that became the real impetus of Picasso’s contributions to the new movement.