

The Barbarian, Sociopath and Madman who became an Artist

Paul Cézanne lived a fascinating life and was known to be a man who sought to break through the barriers of the traditional impressionistic style by applying and incorporating the value of his own beliefs. His artwork never failed to keep his name in the spotlight, whether he was receiving negative or positive feedback from the public. Even though his early artwork was not widely accepted by the art community, he still managed to surprise and captivate their attention. However, in the beginning of his career, it was difficult for him to become recognized as a painter. The incorporation of impressionist and cubist qualities in his artwork caused some spectators who lived through this era, to misinterpret his true intentions of becoming an artist, because they considered him to be a barbarian, sociopath and madman.¹ The community's negative influence took a toll on Cézanne and caused him to lose confidence within himself, as he was tormented by self-doubt. The constant reminder of rejection was evident throughout his life, and even more so was depicted through his paintings, especially *The Large Bathers*. For example, the Paris Salon denied his paintings for forty years, he failed to have his artwork recognized by those outside his immediate circle until his thirties, he kept his burning passion to become an artist a secret from his father, and it was not until the late age of fifty-six when he entered his first solo exhibition, ten years prior to his death of pneumonia. Although he obtained criticism from spectators who did not believe in Cézanne's twist to his impressionist title, he never failed to maintain and stick to his own beliefs, traditions and values. Even though many artist of this time period were very dismissive towards Cézanne's artwork and were not accepting of his progressive style and technique, this French painter is now recognized, and has been granted the title of the "father of modern art". Cézanne's artistic value is a combination of the

¹ Alex Danchev, *Cézanne: a life*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012. Print. 1

events that occurred throughout this career. His material derives off of other artist's ideas, as he borrows their techniques but resonates features of his private life to make them his own. The significance of Cézanne's paintings does not revolve around the perfection of his artwork, but rather in the quality of his whole achievement, which can be seen in his latest masterpiece, *The Large Bathers*. Around 1890 Cézanne's unique style of art began to receive critical attention from a large group of commentators that consisted of impressionist companions, symbolist admirers, and a diverse body of critics and journalist.² Many details of Paul Cézanne's work link back to his Catholic faith, beliefs, and traditions due to the spiritual attributes, which is noticeably infused within his paintings and is prevalent through many commentator's reviews. These critics pointed their attention to the continuous use of spiritual symbolism portrayed throughout *The Large Bathers*, which manages to capture the surprising simplicity, but complex lifestyle he lived.

The Large Bathers embodies the simplicity and sensitivity of nature. The central theme of this painting links to Cézanne's Christian background and revolves around the harmony of the nude figures and naturist landscape that surrounds them. The subject focuses mainly on the gestures and acts of the seventeen nude figures that are incorporated in the painting. Although some figures of the nude women are distorted, Cézanne's use of subject matter, which consists of a lake, church and open landscape, helps construct a narrative. He shows that these nude figures are all gathering together to perform a ritual by incorporating the natural elements surrounding them. Taking all aspects into account such as the church in the background, and the normal nudity of women, Cézanne's pastoral painting, implies that the setting embraces a sacred, ritual space, which many commentators agree with. The freedom of the nude women is depicted by

² Richard Shiff, *Seeing Cézanne* (Critical Inquiry, Vol. 4, No. 4) Summer 1978. 771.

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1342954). Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1342954>

their naked bodies and their carefree emotions, which reflects on the biblical story of Adam and Eve, because their nudity captures both the quality of total innocence and nonconformity. His constant references to Christianity reflect how serious he was about obeying the laws of the Catholic Church. Each individual is painted in a state of ease with themselves and their openness amongst the group. Their body language and interactions with each other help show their acceptance and respect towards one another. The open space within the painting suggests that there are no strict laws of society, rules to obey, or rather a solid structure for them to follow. This supports how their freedom of nudity is very accepting, how they do not belong to a higher society, and ultimately how they are one with nature. Forming the bridge between the 19th Century Impressionism and 20th Century Cubism, Paul Cézanne's use of composition, brushstrokes, and different planes of colour, creates a religious and spiritual overtone, which is portrayed in *The Large Bathers*.

Cézanne pays close attention to the composition of this piece. The continuous triangular form is persistent throughout the painting. Big or small, he purposely paints each figure to form and create a triangle, and it is incorporated into almost every figure that is drawn. For example, the nude women are standing, sitting or kneeling to create hidden triangles. The form of their arms and legs are carefully angled with their actions to create a triangular shape within the spaces where their body is not. To be more specific, the two women that are closest to the front on the left and right have their hand reaching towards the middle of which looks like an offering. The space in between their arm, stomach, and upper thigh take on geometric constructions, such as a triangle. The religious overtone of this repetitive shape represents the holy trinity, which refers to the three natures of God; the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. Another example where this can be seen is the form of the church tower and trees in the background that make up

the skyline. Looking closely, the roof of the church and the top of the trees are also shaped and drawn to reveal a triangular form. The trees in the distance act as if they are watching over their ritual because they surround the nude women. Stepping back and looking at the picture as a whole, the largest triangular composition makes up the structure of the painting. The tree trunks are angled to lean in diagonally to hover over the gathers. This ultimately creates a peephole for the viewers, because it gives them a gateway into the landscape. Because the tree trunks are towering over the women, it acts as a shield and source of safety. This creates a religious overtone because the sanctuary is a symbolization of God looking over the nude women to defend them from creating sin and being exposed to evil. The triangular composition frames the painting, and forces the viewer to look beyond the movement of the nude women that occurs at first glance.

The brushstrokes vary in size throughout the painting, and help the viewers distinguish what is meant to stand out. Since the main focus are the nude women that are gathered towards the center of the painting, they are painted with heavy and dark brushstrokes that are very angled and distorted. Associate Professor of Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Richard Shiff agrees that the fracture of Cézanne's nude figures is characterized by clear visible parallel strokes which he mentions in his article *Seeing Cézanne*.³ This thick and broken outlining of the figures helps the viewer's eye to be drawn towards what is meant to stand out. The distinct brushstroke of the women's bottom who is laying down on the right, facing the lake, are very outlined which gives off a sense of femininity. This is seen once again, but instead, with breasts, of the figure that is leaning against the tree trunk. Both of these figures support the religious spiritual overtone, because women, who are proud to embrace their femininity, reflect

³ Shiff, 776.

on how God created her through his own image. In contrast, to the heavy brushstrokes, there is less definition with the brushstrokes used to shape their faces, which results in a lack of emotion. Their blank expressions can be seen through their hollow eyes, cavernous nose, and lightly contoured jawlines. Although there is not one specific brushstroke that outlines the figures as a whole, each line overlaps each other to complete the full form. Many of the brushstrokes also appear to be out of place. However, Cézanne makes it look like they are placed there for a reason. Along with the figures, the tree trunks that hover over the figures gathered are also outlined with heavy dark brushstrokes. This shows how the nature in this painting is also very important to pay attention to. The brushstrokes that set up the skyline are a bit lighter and less aggressive which has a very calming effective to the viewer. Since there is so much detail with the nude figures and tree trunks, the composition of the artwork allows the viewers to take a deep breath with the openness of the skyline, and look at the painting as a whole. The light brush strokes form an equal balance between the harsh outlining that is seen more towards the front of the painting. Although there is a combination of thick layers of swirling paint, the loose brushstrokes that form the ripples on the lake generate are very peaceful and tranquil feeling. The reasoning behind this may have to do with the title of the painting, as it suggests that the water from the lake is very significant. Cézanne's impressionistic techniques are exemplified through small and large brush strokes of the lake that makes it appear sketched and unfinished. Shiff, supports this idea when he stated Cézanne's art was "generally regarded as incomplete...and often as primitive."⁴ He purposely varies the size of the strokes in hopes of generating a sense of movement and depth to make the vibrations of the lake look realistic to the viewer. He also comments on how Cézanne's brushwork appears as an abstraction as the loosely structured

⁴ Shiff, 771.

strokes manages to give the painting definition. Water is the most natural element that is needed for cleansing. One figure is shown swimming in the lake, which represents a cleansing of the body. Realistically when one bathes, one is cleaning themselves from dirt and grime. However, through a religious sense, when one is getting baptized, one is being cleansed from their sins. Cézanne purposely intends the calming feeling that the lake presents. It is very affective because it shows how important it is for the figure to be cleansed in the sacred lake, and walk on a clean slate and newness of life.

Although Cézanne was categorized to be Impressionist painter, the range of colours used to paint *The Large Bathers* differed greatly while comparing it to other painters who belonged in this era.⁵ Cézanne uses both warm and cool colour palettes to associate human oneness with nature. The nude figures are painted in peachy pink tones, burnt yellow and a smokey amethyst. The bather that sits closest to the front on the left does not have a face. Instead, it is replaced with different shades of lavender that is used to paint the back of the figure that is placed directly behind. By blending the two figures together, they demonstrate a sense of unity and togetherness. The sacred overtone reflects on God's message that all men are created equal, and that it is important to stick together as a whole. The hands of the two nude figures that are placed in the center are filled in with a tannish neutral base and are highlighted by the unpainted bits of the white canvas. The colours are not enclosed within the boundaries of a given line, so the spots of white match the colour of the offering placed in the middle, blending the two together. This shows their connection with nature. Another example of this is the two mirroring figures that border the far left and far right sides of the painting. There is a light outlining of these two symmetric figures, however they are not shaded in to match the other women around them.

⁵ Wildenstein, 3.

Instead they are filled in with shades of indigo, periwinkle and a chalky cornflower, which are the same colours used to paint the landscape. In fact, this affective method merges the two figures with the nature, as if they are camouflaged, so that the two can become bonded into one fused form. God created elements of nature with the intentions and hope that humans would rule the land, care for it, and cultivate what he has blessed them with. By fusing them together, it symbolizes God's intention for humans to treat the earth as a gift, and nurture it as they would nurture themselves. Cézanne purposely paints the white clouds to look fluffy to denote innocence. The spiritual overtone with this colour is affiliated with angels because they are usually portrayed to wear white clothing. The soft sky is made up of swirling mass of baby blue, lilac, and small blotches of white. These vibrant colours help create a sense of calmness, which helps the viewers to look beyond the given perspective, as it adds depth and stability to the painting. The blue energy acts as a breath of fresh air, and is often associated with image of The Virgin Mary and heaven. Cézanne makes sure not to overwhelm the painting with different shades of blue, however he did believe that a certain quantity of bluish tints were necessary to add because he believed this lively colour had the ability to give life to other colours.⁶ Cézanne pays close attention to his colour palettes, and uses them to his advantage because he strongly believed that "volume and depth exists not only through drawing and perspective, but should also emerge from the colour itself."⁷ Overall, the pureness of these colours represents faith and spirituality. All of the other elements of nature such as the tree trunks and ground are painted with a combination of a warm chestnut brown and sandy tone. These earthy tones give a feeling of solidity because it corresponds with the base in which the earth is built on.

⁶ Wildenstein, 3.

⁷ Wildenstein, 4.

There are many distinctive elements in *The Large Bathers*, which makes this artwork, fit in Cézanne's artistic career and how he lived life through the eyes of Jesus. Born and raised at 28 Rue De L'Opera, Aix-En-Provence on January 19, 1839, Cézanne's father always had high hopes that his only son would pursue a career in law rather than art. Despite his father's wishes, inspiring artist Paul Cézanne who was persuaded to attend law school for six years later began painting at the age of 20. The Catholic Church had a large impact on Cézanne's life as it instilled traditional values that created a strict boundary to help manage his violent, irascible and uncontrollable temper as a child.⁸ Catholicism became increasingly prevalent in his life after attending *Pensionnat Saint-Joseph*. Although he attended this school from 1850-1860, his relationship and bond with God truly began after his first holy communion. The symbolism of this ceremony "stirred his soul," which deepened and ultimately solidified his beliefs in the catholic religion.⁹ This idea reflects back to 1850-1860 when Cézanne's became a pupil at the *Pensionnat Saint-Joseph* in France.¹⁰ After receiving religious instruction by the *Abbe Savournin* he became highly sensitive and imaginative towards the Catholic religion.¹¹

In 1870 disagreement between Prussia and France sparked the Franco-Prussian War. French Emperor Napoleon III was determined to win this battle and required all French citizens to register in the National Guard to fight, including artist Cézanne himself. In hopes of avoiding the war, he fled to L'Estauqe where he hid with his bride to be Marie-Hortense Fiquet. Being forced to live away from home, the shores of the Mediterranean required Cézanne to apply the

⁸ Wildenstein, 4.

⁹ Wildenstein, 4.

¹⁰ Wildenstein, *Cezanne: His life*. New York: Wildenstein & Co.1958. Pg. 2 Print.

¹¹ Wildenstein, 3.

naturist landscape to his paintings.¹² While on the island, he took advantage of the open space he was given and managed to execute a substantial number of paintings. His escape from France benefited his artistic evolution, which is shown through the progressive development of his ability to create depth within his artwork. As a result he accomplished the ability to lure the viewer into the landscape of his artwork, allowing them to build a connection between humans and God's reflection in nature, which is displayed in *The Large Bathers*.

Although Cézanne's father persuaded him to attend law school, Cézanne could not help but follow his own desires to become a painter and join his good friend Emile Zola in Paris around the time of his graduation. His father became rather tolerant of his son's artistic aspirations and granted him the opportunity to study in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1856.¹³ This caused him to be greatly influenced by the 19th century art movement, impressionism, which originated by a group of artist who lived in Paris. Painting characteristics of the Impressionist movement consisted of an open composition, varying size of brush strokes, inclusion of movement, uncanny visual angles and an emphasis on an accurate depiction of light in its changing qualities. As a modern artist who was constantly rejected by the jury of the official Paris Salon, he felt some kinship with the group and befriended artist Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet.¹⁴ Working beside these artists influenced him to brighten up his colour palette and work "en plein air" which means "in plain air" after being translated into English.¹⁵ This challenged the concepts of colour and light that was accepted in the era prior to

Impressionism by using more natural methods of lighting. In 1872 Cézanne decided to move to

¹² Cézanne, Paul, John Rewald, and Seymour Hacker. *Paul Cézanne, letters*. New York, N.Y.: Hacker Art Books, 1984. Print. 135

¹³ Wildenstein, 5.

¹⁴ Shiff, 771.

¹⁵ Sidney Geist, *Cézanne: "The Large Bathers II"* (Notes in the History of Art, Vol. 12, No. 1) Fall 1992, Pg. 15. Publish By: [Ars Brevis Foundation, Inc.](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23207837) Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23207837>

Pontoise, where he worked closely with Pissarro for 2 years. During this period, Cézanne was greatly influenced to work outdoors and paint directly with nature which caused him to broaden his colour palette. He abandoned the idea of working in his studio and took a different approach of viewing the world with freshness and immediacy by confronting landscapes directly. This helped him observe the true connection nature shares with the divine. As a result, the variety of colours he used and his ability to create shapes on the canvas, allowed his style and technique to become more of a personalized structure, which helped distinguish his artwork from other artist.

Cézanne started painting *The Large Bathers* in 1898 and did not complete this masterpiece until 1905, a year before he died. During the last few years of his life he did not travel as much as he did in his younger years due to a chronic condition, which he had been dealing with for a long time. The pain he endured through his sickness directly affected the long period of time that he took to complete his last painting. Even though he did work on this series of bathers for a few years, the nude figures appear remarkably unfinished and flat, which may be a result of his weakening health.

Cézanne's complex technique portrayed in *The Large Bathers* sums up the experiences and explorations during the last century of his life. Since he painted a series of bathers throughout his lifetime, I strongly believe that this is the greatest of his "Bathers" paintings. The size of the painting, which initially drew me in to explore the history behind it, really depicts the religious subject that constitutes one of the most important subjects in Cézanne's life. Not only in terms of the size, but also the wide range of colours, extensive brushstrokes and the majestic quality is forced onto the viewer to create a sense of affirmation that Cézanne had the strength to believe in himself, and succeeded as an Artist. When coming up with a narrative, I first

acknowledged the title of the piece and assumed that this painting revolved around the idea of bathing. When spending much time with the painting at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I concluded that the nude bathers were practicing a ritual that incorporated the baptism of one of their members.

After acquiring the knowledge of Cézanne's devotion to Catholicism in 1890, I was shocked to realize that I had the possibility of making a pretty accurate assumption along with some of the critic reviews I discovered while researching. Although there has been much controversy about this painting over the years, there are a few articles I found that agreed with my theory that this spiritual painting has many biblical references. Critic Sidney Geist agrees with my idea that the development of this strong connection between nature and God is portrayed in *The Large Bathers* as symbolism is carried throughout the painting. Geist concludes that Cézanne intended to paint female nudes distorting themselves in a natural setting to provide a pretext for pictorial composition.¹⁶ However, he also suggests that Cézanne subliminally painted the story of Susanna¹⁷, as *The Large Bathers* embodies this biblical reference. The story of Susanna is included in the Book of Daniel in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. In this narrative, a fair Hebrew wife, Susanna, bathes in her garden, where she is unknowingly accompanied by two lustful elders who spy on her in secrecy. When she is done bathing, she makes her way back home until she encounters the two elders who confess their love for her. They threaten to blackmail her if she refuses to have sex with them by telling the King that her true intention of bathing in the garden was to secretly meet a young man. Geist notes that the similarity of "sound in Susanna and Cézanne, [share] such punning relations that

¹⁶ Geist, 17.

¹⁷ Geist, 17.

occur constantly in the oeuvre,”¹⁸ because the plot of this story matches *The Large Bathers* implied narration. He implies that the figure swimming in the lake portrays the Hebrew wife Susanna, bathing in garden. He also claims that the elders who are spying on Susanna are depicted as the two figures hidden in the trees¹⁹ on the far right and far left who appear hidden in the trees and camouflaged within the nature. He supports his symbolic reference by stating that these are the only two figures in the painting that do not share any human interactions with one another. Therefore, they never had the intention to be seen by the other travelers that are also painted in this picture. Professor of international relations at the University of Nottingham, Alex Danchev, also embarks on Cézanne’s landscape which includes the structure of a church in *The Large Bathers* and comments on the spiritual symbolism is carries as he compares the painting to the “Chartres Cathedral” located in France. Not only does the artwork itself capture the image of a cathedral, but it also drove Danchev to acknowledge Cézanne’s religious background as he associated the painting to a catholic reference. The triangular bathing composition tremendously impacted Danchev because of its repetitive occurrence throughout the painting. He mentions how the continuous triangular shapes really puts “the nudes in perspective,”²⁰ and ultimately reminded him of the sacred geometry used to build and design this spiritual church. The triangular symmetry of the towers of this cathedral is not only appealing to viewers but also has a central role to play in the design and construction of this building. The many triangles that can be seen in *The Large Bathers* is also portrayed through the structure of the Chartres Cathedral.

Paul Cézanne’s painting *The Large Bathers* derives off of a profound sense of spatial openness, which is introduced through his technique and style. Although he adopts other artists’

¹⁸ Geist, 18.

¹⁹ Geist, 17-18

²⁰ Danchev. 346.

techniques, he strays away from the traditional impressionistic style and incorporates a different flair to his artwork to make it his own. Ultimately, he challenges the standard representation that is expected of viewers, and transforms the painted subject matter the way he envisions it to be portrayed. Along with Cézanne's use of independent structure, the uniting force of his brushstrokes, composition and colour help create a religious and spiritual overtone that can be seen when one analyzes the subject matter. Although Cézanne was commonly referred to as Impressionist painter, his aims and goals were not always corresponding to the other artist categorized under this artistic style. The way Cézanne emphasizes the vibrant colours and creates scenes that embody distortion within *The Large Bathers*, truly reveals the mastery of his unique style and the artistic evolution he developed throughout his lifetime. Cézanne's input of religious aspects of the painting provokes critics like Richard Shiff and Alex Danchev to make connections to other spiritual resemblances. The overall message that Cézanne conveys through his mature artwork is the essence of living life attuned to nature and through the reflection of God.

Bibliography

- Cézanne, Paul, John Rewald, and Seymour Hacker. *Paul Cézanne, letters* New York, N.Y.: Hacker Art Books, 1984. Print.
- Danchev, Alex. *Cézanne: a life*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012. Print. 1
- Geist, Sidney. *Cézanne: "The Large Bathers II"*(Notes in the History of Art, Vol. 12, No. 1) Fall 1992, Pg. 15. Publish By: [Ars Brevis Foundation, Inc.](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23207837) Article Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23207837>>
- Harris, Beth , and Steven Zucker. "Cezanne's The Large Bathers." - *Smarthistory*. Rebecca Jeffrey Easby. Web URL: <<http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/cezanne-the-large-bathers.html>>.
- "Paul Cezanne." *Artble: The Home of Passionate Art Lovers*. Web URL: <http://www.artble.com/artists/paul_cezanne>
- Shiff, Richard. *Seeing Cézanne* (Critical Inquiry, Vol. 4, No. 4) Summer 1978. 771. Published by: The University of Chicago Press. Article Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1342954>>
- Wildenstein, *Cezanne: His life*. New York: Wildenstein & Co.1958. Pg. 2 Print.