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# CÉZANNE AND HIS OFFSPRING

BY DAN BISCHOFF/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Montclair's most ambitious exhibit  
features 18 Cézannes among the work of 34  
American painters and photographers.



Top, Paul Cézanne's "Bathers" (1898-1900) Influenced American works such as Max Weber's "The Bathers" (1909), above left, and Maurice Prendergast's "Bathers by the Sea"

After all the retrospectives given to Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) in recent years — especially the magisterial survey at the Philadelphia Art Museum in 1996 and its smaller “Cezanne and Beyond,” which ran until last May and mixed the early modern master with his European and American descendants — you could be forgiven for assuming that it was almost impossible to really “see” a Cezanne again.

Cezanne ought to be an image on the order of, say, Rembrandt’s “Syndics of the Drapers’ Guild,” as familiar as a cigar box lid in the 1960s that artist Larry Rivers actually attached 3-D cigars to the bottom of to acknowledge our common memory. One more Cezannesque tilted table-top still-life, blank-eyed portrait, or lumpy hump of Mont Saint-Victoire, and we’ll all scream.

But walk into the main gallery of the Montclair Art Museum’s new “Cezanne and American Modernism,” which opens today, and glance at the wall in front of you, the one holding Cezanne’s “Mont Saint-Victoire Seen from the Bibemus Quarry” (1897) flanked by two 1927 copies by American artist Marsden Hartley (1877-1943).

The deep ultramarine shadow that covers the lower slopes in both Hartleys is almost a cut-out stencil laid over the Cezanne, and suddenly the faintly lugubrious motif (Cezanne painted his mountain, which you can see from the backyard of his father’s house in Aix-en-Provence, more than 60 times) jumps into focus once again. Especially when laid next to the Hartley on the right, in which the mountain rises all in reds, pinks and yellows above its blue-black base, like a transparent volcano.

The conceit of “Cezanne and American Modernism” is to apportion some 18 Cezannes among the work of 34 American painters and photographers (together accounting for some 150 objects), with all the Yankee art of homage completed between the 1907 memorial to Cezanne in Paris and the Depression year of 1930. Many of the selections are quite obvious, like Stanton MacDonald-Wright’s 1913 portrait of his brother, the art critic Willard Huntington Wright, which is evidently based on Cezanne’s portrait of French art critic Gustave Geffroy from 1897 (the Montclair

folks have helpfully attached a tiny reproduction of any obvious antecedent to an American work right onto the wall copy). But others are more remote, even notional, like Patrick Henry Bruce’s hard-edged still-life called “Painting” (1929-30), or the surprisingly numerous photographs of abstracted shadows or fruit and vegetables caught by a camera hovering just above them. The remarkably diverse Americans nonetheless seem to be shepherding Cezanne into his correct orbits, like little moons in the rings of Saturn, clarifying the larger pattern.

“I suppose our biggest worry was that the Americans would not hold up in the presence of the great man,” says Gail Stavitsky, chief curator at Montclair, who organized this exhibition in collaboration with Katherine Rothkopf, senior curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art (the show will travel on to Baltimore and the Phoenix Art Museum). “But that’s not how it worked out, in the end — they almost seem to be pointing up Cezanne’s stylistic innovations.”

Which were many, and often of the most subtle sort. Stavitsky says Cezanne is best known for bringing “form out of color,” by opposing contrasting wedges of pure pigment in a way that masses shapes on the canvas, and for his “broken contours,” the sketchy outlines of his figures that allow pure colors in one shape to reflect or reprise the hue of another. This certainly sounds like a very technical achievement, and it is; maybe a better way to say it is Cezanne distilled many of the color theories and radical pictorial strategies of the 19th century into a singularly analytical style, which became the foundation of modern painting. Cezanne is the secret sauce of modernism, and he makes it all taste French. Without using any butter, either.

Perhaps the best way to see the universality of Cezanne is in paintings where an American has combined elements taken from several artists at once, like Max Weber’s “The Bathers” (painted in 1909, making it one of the very earliest American pictures here). “The Bathers” was clearly inspired by the Cezanne of the same title, but it sports a nifty Matissean nude in the lower-right corner (it was all French to Weber). Even better is the long line of Provençales who’ve lit out for the

West, like Jozef Bako, Willard Nash and John Marin, who adapted Cezanne to the sun-dappled clarity of the Southwest deserts — there’s even a “Corn Dance, San Ildefonso,” painted in 1919 by B.J.O. Nordfeldt (1878-1955), in which Native Americans are composed by contrasting wedges of pure pigment isolated by broken contours, just like a card player or a boy in a red vest.

Closer to home, we have Oscar Bluemner, whose “Jersey Silk Mills (Paterson)” (1911), from a private collection in New Jersey, suggests where all the little blocks of pure color were heading: toward abstraction. Yet at the other end of the spectrum, we have thickly painted compositions made with clotted cream, like Maurice Prendergast’s “Still Life: Fruit and Flowers” (1910-13), which draw their inspiration from very early Cezannes, before the master had arrived at his classical manner. He was as protean as paint itself, and as simple as “Five Apples” (1877-78).

The Montclair Art Museum is just coming off of the success of “The Wyeths: Three Generations,” which brought a daily average of 500 visitors to its galleries (a record for the museum), and now it has a pocket blockbuster like “Cezanne and American Modernism,” which has been 10 years in the making. Montclair has extended its hours, but decided to charge no special surcharge for this show — a nod to the state of the economy, no doubt, but a bargain nonetheless.

## art review



**Montclair Art Museum**

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