

## The Father of Us All

### Cézanne Portraits, The National Portrait Gallery, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2017 to 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018

The textbooks tell us that Cézanne is a pivotal figure in the history of western art. Best known for his still-lives and landscapes, Cézanne reacted against the Impressionists' focus on colour and light caught at a particular moment by re-introducing shape and form into painting, paving the way for the modern art of cubism and abstraction to the extent that Picasso no less called Cézanne 'the father of us all'.

But Cézanne also painted portraits throughout his life and The National Portrait Gallery's exhibition *Cézanne Portraits* offers a welcome two-fold opportunity. It's the first exhibition to focus on these paintings. It is also the first time many of these have been displayed together and even the first time some have been seen in the UK. But secondly Cézanne's portraits divide opinion. For some, Cézanne's genius is revealed through his focus on the physical presence of his sitters, their sheer matter-of-factness, while for others, his obsessional deconstruction into geometric shapes and fields of colour drains the life from his sitters. The exhibition then offers the chance both to view and to reassess these paintings.

The exhibition is ordered chronologically; indeed, the NPG have successfully brought together prime pieces from galleries as far apart as Brazil, the US and Sweden to provide a complete survey of Cézanne's development as a portrait artist. What's more, this time-ordering brings into close focus the symbiotic connection between Cézanne's life and relationships, and his art. Painting only the people he was comfortable with – his friends, family, wife and himself - Cézanne painted the same sitters over and over again, and these series of paintings perhaps offer the best way to understand Cézanne's approach to portraiture.

Early in the show for instance, we see the portraits of Uncle Dominique, Cézanne's maternal uncle. In these, Cézanne is working in the 'maniere couillard' or 'ballsy' style, using a palette knife to apply thick layers of paint to literally construct the likeness. These are powerful works made by the artist physically building up layers of paint, almost plastering the canvas until he has realised the likeness of his uncle. At its best, this approach produces representations of the solidity and presence of the sitter, as in *Uncle Dominique in Smock and Blue Cap* of 1866-7.



*Uncle Dominique in Smock and Blue Cap 1866-7, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Wolfe Fund, 1951  
acquired from The Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Collection*

This approach though can tip into aggression and crudeness, while the search for the underlying geometric essence of the sitter can feel obsessional, and displayed alongside this painting of Uncle Dominique are several smaller scale paintings of the same man that raise the question dogging critical responses to Cézanne's portraits. Are these paintings the quest to capture the physical presence of the sitter or are they the result of Cézanne working through a theory that reduces portraits to formal representations, to studies rather than likenesses?

This paradox comes to the fore in the portraits of Hortense Fiquet. They met when Cézanne was 30 and Hortense 19, subsequently married, and had a child - Paul - together. In total, Cézanne painted 29 portraits of Hortense, of which 11 are on show in four series of paintings. We first see a young fashionably dressed Hortense, caught in the act of sewing in one painting, and poised and passive in the others. Next, we see her after becoming Madame Cézanne in a series of more closely observed portraits, while later still, we see Hortense first posed in a red dress, then finally in a blue dress.

Painted over a period of around 20 years, Cézanne's early depictions of his lover and subsequent wife show initial signs of tenderness and delicacy. But subsequently the portraits become expressionless - Hortense's face is inscrutable, bored and vacant in the paintings made soon after their wedding - until in the last paintings of her, Cézanne's representations of his wife have become so stylized that her face is now a perfectly oval, featureless mask, as in *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress* of 1888-90.



*Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress 1888-90 Art Institute of Chicago, Wilson L. Mead Fund*

On one level, it is possible to see a complicit relationship between Cézanne and his wife in these paintings, one in which an accepting Hortense posed stoically for the marathon sittings Cézanne is famous for. At another level, these later portraits of Hortense are important works that create the most obvious link to the cubism of Picasso and Braque and to the birth of modern art. And yet, these are not easy paintings to like. The NPG notes for instance that these are tough paintings in which Hortense has been 'defeminised' and which have been subject to 'startlingly misogynist interpretations in the past which are finally changing'.

And at this point, I'll have to declare my big reservation about this exhibition – the NPG promises a 'unique and fascinating insight' into Cézanne's portraiture and yet delivers little of the sort. Rather the wall notes accompanying the paintings seem plagued by art-babble. This issue starts early – the first sentence in the first room reads 'Cézanne inherited a rudimentary understanding' of portraiture. I for one have no idea what 'inherited' means in that sentence. 'Inherited' from whom? What I think it means is that Cézanne was self-taught with minimal formal artistic training, having been whisked away by his father from the study of drawing to start law school. If that was NPG's intention, then why remove agency from Cézanne, making him passively 'inherit' when knowing he was self-taught would have significantly enhanced the sense that the exhibition is about Cézanne's life-long quest to fully work through his unique artistic perspective?

Coming back to the later paintings of Hortense, the NPG has again mangled agency – who's the misogynist in these interpretations? Is it Cézanne or is it the critics? Are we to believe Cézanne was a woman-hater or are these works being misunderstood by the critics? This makes a big difference to how one responds to Cézanne's paintings of his wife. And how is the interpretation of these paintings changing? Having teased with this possibility, unfortunately the NPG doesn't enlighten us. I even went back for a second visit just to re-read the wall notes, but there's nothing that follows up this assertion. The NPG has then missed a major opportunity to shed new light on the perennial paradox of these paintings.

And what of the man behind this paradox? Like everything else he painted, Cézanne subjected his own likeness to detailed scrutiny. Second only to the number of times he painted Hortense, Cézanne produced 26 self-portraits and the exhibition includes examples from each period of his life. With compelling honesty, these portraits trace the physical changes of his life's journey. We see him first as a wild-eyed young man in *Self-Portrait* c.1862-4, his features picked out in blood-red looking frankly scary. Little wonder perhaps he found securing sitters hard.



*Self-Portrait c.1862-4 Private Collection, New York*

The pictures of his middle years show him bald but luxuriously bearded while the final portrait towards the very end of his life depicts a care-worn and frail old man. The one constant in all these portraits is though his eyes. These are hard, searching eyes in most cases looking at himself and us over his right shoulder. In these eyes, we get a glimpse of the real Cézanne, the man who found relationships a challenge; who only painted those he knew, never accepting commissions; whose marriage to Hortense ebbed away and died; and who spent his final years living alone in Aix-le-Provence; but who nevertheless relentlessly sought out the essence of his sitters' presence in the world and who depicted this with painstaking truthfulness.

And nowhere is this mixture of awkwardness and truthfulness better illustrated in the show than in the very first painting, *The Artist's Father Reading L'Evenement* from 1866.



*The Artist's Father, Reading L'Événement 1866 National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon*

This is a marvelous painting with so much going on, which regrettably the NPG again makes little of. Here is Cézanne pere, solid and successful, a businessman and a banker, a father who while wanting his son to be a lawyer, not an artist, nevertheless provided financial support for Cézanne fils and who ultimately left him a substantial inheritance. But Cézanne has painted him inelegantly on the edge of his

chair, tipped forward as if sliding off, and improbably reading the avant-garde literary journal *L'Evenement* in which Zola, Cézanne's friend, attacked the established artists of the day. What's more, behind his father, Cézanne has included one of his own still-lives while in the next room and only revealed by recent cleaning, we can see into Cézanne's studio. If the portrait had been painted a hundred years later, it might have been subtitled *Sticking it to the man*, so subversive are Cézanne's intentions.

This exhibition's glass then is either half-full or half-empty. Half-full, the show provides the opportunity to view some rarely seen individual gems and to appreciate the life's work of a seminal artist. But half-empty, the show's opportunity to offer 'unique and fascinating' insights is sadly left unfulfilled.

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