

## SEARCHING FOR CREATIVE INSIGHT WITH CEZANNE

There was plenty of anticipation when planning our visit to Aix-En-Provence (referred to as “Ex”) in southern France. Paul Cezanne’s workshop is on a hill overlooking Aix. This painter’s studio is in his last home. A prolific artist, it’s widely reported he produced a couple thousand sketches, some nine hundred oil paintings, and close to half that amount in watercolors. It is said he persevered in trying to get each single stroke right.

His style is not my favorite, but that wasn’t important. I’m a novice at understanding, either artistically or monetarily, world famous art. Workshops intrigue me. I needed to use this opportunity to survey his creative place.

Cezanne lived in many locations. He was born and died in Aix-En-Provence, France, 1839-1906. With connections to Picasso and Van Gogh, it’s said he influenced others such as Gauguin, Manet, Pissarro, and Delacroix. Even though some Impressionists weren’t fond of his work, art historians recognize him as an Impressionist.

Four attributes appear to define Cezanne’s style. He used a distinctive parallel and perpendicular ‘crosshatch’ brushstroke in his still lifes and other paintings. His unique color pallet is famous. The early Cubist and Post-Impressionist visualizations derived from his concept of stereovision. It’s reported that he painted canvasses from the inside to the outside.

My visit to his studio wasn’t an art.com trip. I didn’t think if I saw this location, I’d know the artist’s portfolio. My trip hoped to engage with the physical location and attempt to perceive how the creative spirit became actualized. This artist’s desire to capture a specific vision attracts critical attention.

I look for insights into the creative process, so with a knapsack of sorts-drawstring bag with water bottles and granola bars-we set out for Cezanne’s last home. We walked uphill, which continued to gain steepness, for at least twenty minutes. The route is from lower Aix near the Fontaine de la Rotunde to his home near a hilltop. Many of his still lifes’ subjects crowded the shelves along the old faded light green to grey walls: vase; teapot; wine bottle; fruit bowl. The folded easel is near the tall ladder he took outside through the special door cut into the wall for the ladder’s ingress and egress.

I didn’t pretend to wear his old coat, nor stand outside where he observed his oft painted mountain. I sought to grasp how he comprehended the intended subject. Reports about Cezanne’s method center on how he worked at perceiving a particular aspect of his subject. Sometimes he described a particular color he wanted as being in a geometric shape. His struggle moved that image in his head to the fingertips holding the brush, looking for the right approach.

Descriptions of him taking a long time to put paint on canvass shade how he’s evaluated. I pictured his mind squinting to see how the shape he wanted should arrive on the canvass with the chosen color on just the right sized brush for the appropriately angled stroke. It’s said he painted from the center of the canvass out. This makes sense to me, but perhaps not to those who expected he’d paint the apple first, then the bowl, etc.

I summarized his process and concluded that I loved it. He stared in concentration. He looked for the right color, the shape of the color, and where it belonged on his canvass. He deconstructed, by color, what he gazed upon, and reconstructed the color and the shape from the center out. Actualizing the vision required the skilled mastery of both his focused perception and his physical control of the various brushes.

I found some comparison with Cezanne's creative journey and the 20-30,000-year-old cave art of southern France. We toured a private cave, found in the 1900s behind a rock in a farmer's barn. I've also seen the wonderful representations of the duplicated Lascaux cave. The latter displays paintings in replica caves to protect the original art. The original works of art suffered from human air, harsh photographic lights, oily hands, and smoke.

After walking into these caves, guides showed us the simple curved line drawings found deep inside. There were no practice drawings near the sparse characterizations of the animals. Artists created the works without simultaneously seeing the animals. The visions represented sprang from a memory of the animal being recalled at the time of the painting. Cezanne and other 'famous' artists gazed at their subjects until turning a little to their canvass. But the cave artists could not see the subjects while painting.

Cognition of the subject and representing it are two different processes of art separated by time and application of a media. These cave paintings are lasting testaments to the vast intelligence of early wo/man who could comprehend the shape of a large, sometimes moving mammal, probably at a safe distance. Then they "record" it in their brain. They decided, based on need, desire, or both, to draw the memory.

They knew they could access the memory. Someone carried a lamp, organized to bring some liquid colors, and a brush of some type, as s/he or they walked into the cave, found the "right" wall and standing situation, and prepared to pick up the "brush." The next action pulled up the cognized shape, and in just a very few continuous curved lines, drew the silhouette of a moving beast. The capture of features and motion, without obvious corrections, using only simple and continuous lines, is astonishing.

That art form speaks to me about the creative process. It is two fundamental acts bound in a method, pairing something you want to represent and representing it.

A couple of days earlier, we'd been on a tour in the central part of Aix and learned that Emile Zola was a school chum and a friend of Paul's. In Cezanne's studio, Atelier de Cezanne, I found a summary of a conversation between the two men. It turned out, this is what I was looking for. Paul painted a mountain quite a few times, each time deciding what and how he wanted it represented.

I remember this story. It grabbed my head. It goes that after Paul studied an intended subject for some time, he said something like, "I approached the canvass knowing exactly what I wanted to do. When I got to the canvass, I didn't know what to do."

That resonated with me. I prepare what I want to write. But when I get to the keyboard, despite all the handwritten notes around me, I'm not sure where or how to begin.

It's claimed that Paul's friend Emile said something like, "You failed as a painter because you didn't paint what you wanted."

I studied the sentence. On the surface, is Emile saying, "You failed..."? Or is he saying "You, Paul, think you're a failure because you can't get paint on canvass the way you want." I've decided Emile is not criticizing him. He is helping Paul acknowledge he is his own worst critic. I'm sure there are art historians who can correct me.

But I came away with the primary lesson I wanted about creativity from Paul's first comments. He stated, that after studying a subject, "I know exactly what I wanted to do, but when I got to the canvass, I didn't know what to do..." Another way to understand that is: It isn't so much he didn't know as it is he hadn't completed his entrance to the piece, 'the first stroke.' But after studying, he knew what his intended product should be. He needed to

concentrate through to finding the method to represent it. This was his focus in hundreds and hundreds of works.

I determined that creativity, as represented by Cezanne and the cave painters, is a product of two virtues. The first is concentration. What is there that is being perceived that is significant? What is the essence of the perception? The second is mastery of the representation. The will of the artist to grasp the how, the learning, of the manners of depiction.

Many have stated Cezanne preferred solitude, that he spent hours gazing. How many hours does one spend solving a problem? If one doesn't see the right question, then it may not be a tough question to answer. The creativity expressed by the above painters resulted from the concentration and desire to depict something new. It resulted from the work they did. The result sprang from the work of perceiving what they wanted to represent and the work of determining how to make that representation.

It is the same with the blank, white paper. I know when I'm ready. I've figured it out, and now I must force it to the fingertips and start putting words on paper, add, edit, maybe start over, do all of that. Sometimes I found I've started in the middle. And when I consider my process, I acknowledge the mental acuity of those unedited cave artists of 20,000 years ago.