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Apples at the Barnes

by Michael Pepi

Paul Cézanne, The Kitchen Table (La table de cuisine), 1888–90, oil on canvas, 33 3⁄8 × 39 1⁄2 in. (84.8 × 100.3 cm), Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF 2819

It was the genre that Europe disregarded, but Paul Cézanne made it revolutionary. "I want to astonish Paris with an apple" he proclaimed. Tempting critics and flouting convention, Cézanne's still lifes are among his most experimental works; and as an impactful exhibition at the Barnes Foundation argues, they were key to understanding his impact on the history of modern painting.

"The World is An Apple: The Still Lifes of Paul Cézanne" features loans from some of the world's most distinguished museums—including the Guggenheim, Musée d'Orsay, the Detroit Institute of Arts—as well as a number of private collections. This exhibition turns Philadelphia into something of a Cézanne Mecca: in addition to the internationally sourced group in the Barnes' temporary

exhibition space, the Philadelphia Museum of Art boasts impressive Cézanne holdings. Philadelphia native Albert C. Barnes was one of the earliest Americans to collect Cézanne and as such his Foundation's permanent collection has extensive holdings of the French master.

The first room of the temporary exhibition holds two early, small paintings of bottles and fruit. Here Cézanne established his visual identity with a bold interpretation of the still life genre. The show situates these early works as instructive symbols that defined his radical rejection of bourgeois life. The thick application of paint defines works like *Sugar Bowl, Pears, and Blue Cup* (1865-70), marking the beginnings of what he would develop into a full-blown self-mythologizing narrative played out in his demonstrative execution of mundane scenes.

Paul Cézanne, Sugar Bowl, Pears, and Blue Cup (Sucrier, poires et tasse bleue), c. 1866, oil on canvas, 11 13⁄16 × 16 in. (30 × 40.6 cm), Paris, Musée d'Orsay, on deposit at the Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence

Everywhere Cézanne's depictions are obsessed with the limits of representation. In *Still Life with Seven Apples and a Tube of Paint* (1878-1879), he offers a memento of his medium—a tube of paint peers in from the right—to remind us of the artificiality, and thus the fundamental insufficiency, of his craft. The simple materiality of the objects is often the sole focus of the early works. This exhibition has several prime examples illustrating how Cézanne went beyond the programmatic performance of the still life as it was determined by societal context and historical tradition, opting instead to depict the objects in their own right.

Within the exhibition, the works before 1885 are experimental in their modeling and approach to the subject matter—heavily worked application of paint, adventurous use of light and brushstroke—and it is after 1885 when his mature phase is defined by the bold organization of space. We see flashes of this in *Still Life: Apples and Pears* (1888-1890) whose sloping baseline and contrasting color palette hint at the disorienting elements that Cézanne will later synthesize to grand effect. Such elements are collected together in the show's centerpiece, *The Kitchen Table* (1888-1890), which signals the arrival of Cézanne's mature period. Here the canvases are larger and the compositions more complex. As Benedict Leca argues in his rigorous and thoughtful catalogue essay, works such as *Kitchen Table* typify the extent to which Cézanne's use of distortions and "studied disposition of its objects" were a culmination of the artist's long campaign of self-fashioning. It should be mentioned that an added bonus to this exhibition is that audiences can continue to indulge in the triumphant narrative that "The World is An Apple" constructs for Cézanne's still lifes as nearby rooms of the Foundation's permanent collection offer several additional works from the "mature" period. Most notably these include *Still Life* (1892-94) where you can spot shades of Mont Sainte-Victoire in the table cloth.

It is often said that Cézanne's objects "vibrate." But we have to consider how that word's meaning fundamentally differed for Cézanne and his audience; in his time objects vibrated far less often than they do today. Instead, the vibrations and other sensorial effects brought out in the objects of Cézanne's still lifes were the product of carefully measured inversions of both the academic practices of the salon as well as his impressionist forebearers. Cézanne's signature hatched brushstrokes, dexterity, and color contrasts are notable, of course, but what lies beneath these forms is the invigorating manner in which Cézanne intensely considered the delicate interplay of composition and modeling. Leca's essay cites one description that spoke of Cézanne as preoccupied by "drawn-out deliberation rather than the quicksilver touches of the pleinairist."

Leca points to *Apples and Cakes* (1873-77), submitted to the Third Impressionist Exhibition in 1877, in which Cézanne chose not to distinguish among foreground, table, or wall while applying a coarse, almost topographic layer to all parts of the composition. It was in part these two distinctions that gave his objects their vibrant qualities. His depictions drew a line between the poles that tugged at French vision: satisfying neither established conventions nor the fleeting impressions of the then avant-garde. Cézanne's depictions of simple objects are novel in their focus on materiality, giving the intensely modelled subjects a subtle power: they were nothing short of Cézanne's manifesto on painting itself.

Paul Cézanne, Apples and Cakes (Pommes et gateaux), 1873–77, oil on canvas, 18 1⁄8 × 21 3⁄4 in. (46 × 55.2 cm), Private Collection, Copyright: © Christie's Images Limited (2005)

Walking through the exhibition one is reminded of the fact that it is nearly impossible to free your mind of the discourse that surround Cézanne's apples. How could one see them with naiveté? Even to a viewer who has never so much as cracked an art history textbook, their vision has already arrived at the scene informed by the whole history of modern forms that dominate everyday life, to which Cézanne is a Moses-like figure. It is a fragile, contingent vision crowded by the words of Émile Zola, Meyer Schapiro, Roger Fry, even Charles Wright. Approaching the works anew would require the intricate dismembering of the history of modern forms. Despite all this, if you get past the narrative of the tortured artist and the associated hagiography, you might still peer through the views of Cézanne's studio and get a glimpse of the raw pleasure and unadulterated novelty visible to a 19th-century Parisian. It is this possibility—that this originality so couched in pure form is still readable today—that could be the greatest achievement of Cézanne: that humble scenes of his studio can reset the better part of modernism in one careless, disinterested glance.

"The World is an Apple: The Still Lifes of Paul Cézanne" opened at the Barnes Foundation on June 22, and will be on view until September 22, 2014. Its accompanying volume, published by D Giles Limited, is available online and in bookstores.

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