

Inspired by recent research in perceptual psychology, Paul Smith will revise and extend the argument that the distortions in Cezanne's work express how vision unfolds though time

Unfolding vision: Cezanne's 'way of seeing'

The writings of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty indicate that he learned a great deal about perception from studying psychology and from looking at the paintings of Paul Cezanne. By drawing on psychology to explain a range of so-called distortions in Cezanne's work, I hope to expand a little on his arguments, in a fashion he would have found appropriate.

In 1953, Anton Ehrenzweig explained peculiarities in Cezanne's drawing as alterations to the appearance of things lying in peripheral vision, which are brought about by the artist's habit of fixating on other points in the scene. This argument gains credence from the artist's own statements, which indicate that his 'personal way of seeing' involved staring at the motif with a 'static eye' for up to twenty minutes at a time. Something of this sort seems to be at work in *Still Life with Apples and Pot of Primroses* of c. 1890, in which some of the stalks belonging to the leaves at the right of the painting have vanished. And indeed, recent psychological research confirms that objects at the edges of our attention do gradually disappear when we look elsewhere. By implication, then, Cezanne succeeded in showing – in a painting which must by its very nature remain static – how we experience vision as a process which unfolds through time.

Cezanne's faces suffer from distortions, too. In *Madame Cezanne in a Red Dress* of 1888–1890, the sitter's features look displaced and her face resembles a mask. Psychological studies indicate that faces have the peculiarly meaningful look they do because we normally construct perceptual wholes – or gestalts – out of simple, low-spatial frequency information we extract almost instantaneously from them. This suggests that Cezanne's 'masks' can be explained by his unusually prolonged and slow way of looking, which favours shape.

Cezanne extended this practice to landscapes – sometimes viewing the motif for several hours a day, over many months. Comparing the actual Mont Sainte-Victoire with his paintings shows he was interested in how the mountain revealed its shape over the course of time, as the light moved around it. In this respect, his aim was altogether different from Monet's goal of instantaneity. Cezanne, that is, sought what subsists beneath appearances, or what he called 'the heaviness of things'. And this conclusion, Merleau-Ponty would have approved of.



Top

Cezanne, Paul. *Still Life with Apples and a Pot of Primroses*, c. 1890. Oil on canvas. 73 x 92.4 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. Bequest of Sam A. Lewisohn, 1951. 51.112.1.

Bottom

Cezanne, Paul. *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, c. 1902–1906. Oil on canvas. 57.2 x 97.2 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg Collection, Gift of Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg, 1994, Bequest of Walter H. Annenberg, 2002. Accession Number: 1994.420.