



Paul Cézanne:
Fruit on a Cloth,
ca. 1890, oil on
canvas, 15 by 18
inches. Bridgestone
Museum of Art,
Tokyo. Courtesy
the Bridgeman Art
Library.

The Master of Aix

by Richard Kalina

ALEX DANCHEV

Cézanne: A Life

New York, Pantheon, 2012; 488 pages, \$40.

PAUL CÉZANNE (1839-1906), the subject of Alex Danchev's sympathetic, well-researched biography *Cézanne: A Life*, was the quintessential artist's artist. It is hard to think of a painter from the modern period (even Picasso or de Kooning) whose work has occupied such a key place in the hearts of his artistic contemporaries and near contemporaries. His peers collected his work early on and studied it closely. Monet owned 14 Cézannes, Pissarro 21; Caillebotte had five; Degas bought seven in a three-year period; Gauguin owned six (he used to take a favorite Cézanne painting to a neighborhood restaurant and give impromptu lectures on it). Matisse purchased *Three Bathers* (1879-82) in 1899 when he had virtually no success and could scarcely afford it. He kept the painting—one of his most prized possessions—for nearly 40 years before donating it to the Musée de la Ville de Paris. Braque, Picasso and Léger were all enthralled, and

the fascination with Cézanne has scarcely waned, although of course few artists can now afford him (an exception is Jasper Johns, who owns the 1877-78 *Bather with Outstretched Arms*, previously in Degas's collection).

There have been many reasons posited for the attraction. Cézanne's *inquiétude*—his doubt, anxiety and restlessness—has long been a favorite (Picasso advanced the idea, as did the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty); however, it's probably fairer to say that he showed other artists a new way of making paintings—from the inside out, constructing solid yet shifting images from patches of tones set side by side. It was a method of looking very hard at the details while letting the whole take care of itself. After studying Cézanne, you could make well-ordered paintings that broke free of the prison of outlines, creating art that Danchev describes as formally quirky and intense:

Still life looks like indoor landscape; landscape looks like outdoor still life. The rules of perspective are broken; conventional expectations are laid to rest. In the landscape, the horizon slips, like a TV screen on the blink. Blue trees invade blue skies.

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Cézanne hardly seemed destined for artistic greatness. Born in the southern French town of Aix-en-Provence, he was the son of a hatter-turned-moneylender-turned-banker. Relatively well-meaning, Louis-Auguste Cézanne, the archetypal prideful, self-made man, was generous (but not to a fault) with his children. He provided his only son with a modest allowance to pursue a dubious artistic calling, after it became clear that a career in the law, which he had bullied the young Paul into studying, was not going to stick. Financially supportive though he may have been, Cézanne *père* was also intrusive and intensely controlling, and not exactly a believer in his son's talent—referring to him consistently as being *sans profession*. He inspired an anxiety in Cézanne that lasted until 1886, when he died and left the artist a substantial inheritance. (Cézanne lived in such dread of his father's disap-



Cézanne in his studio in 1904, in front of his painting *Large Bathers*, 1895-1906. Photographer unknown. Charmet Archives. Courtesy the Bridgeman Art Library.

proval that he refused to admit that he was married—his wife, Hortense, was from a working-class background—and the father of a young son, although pretty much everybody, including his father, knew the facts.)

Aix and its surroundings loomed large for Cézanne. Even though he spent considerable time in Paris from his 20s on, he returned regularly to his hometown, essentially dividing his life between the two places. With his broad, rolling southern accent, his calculated air of tetchy provincial suspicion and his rough (but formal and courteous) manners, he never really fit in with the Parisian crowd. Neither was he all that at home in Aix. People there knew him and generally liked him (it didn't hurt that his family was rich), but they had very little understanding of his art. The general take was that he was—in a nice way—quite mad.

CÉZANNE WAS NOTHING if not determined. He persevered with his painting when his early work was widely considered to be crude and awkward (as in many ways it was). He had no chance of being admitted to the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris—an institution he scorned—but twice unsuccessfully applied for admission in any case. Similarly, he detested the Salon but continually submitted work, only to have it invariably rejected. He painted onsite outdoors (*sur le motif*, as he called it) in all weathers, without regard to his comfort. That practice, in fact, killed him: Cézanne died a few days after he collapsed while out painting in a thunderstorm and lay unconscious for hours in the rain. But most of all, he had supreme confidence in himself and his art, even though he would make ritual proclamations of humility. In some ways, the more we read about Cézanne, the more he slides away from us. He was hard to get near, both figuratively and literally (he absolutely hated to be touched). This elusiveness presents a real challenge for a biographer, compounded by the difficulties of dealing with a culture that is close to ours in many ways but, in others, quite distant.

It is hard, for example, as deeply invested as our society is in generic popular culture, to understand just how literary that earlier era was. Cézanne and his artist friends read constantly, and just as importantly infused their thoughts about art and society with references to classical (mostly Roman) writers and to the serious novels and poetry of their own age. The writer to whom Cézanne was closest was *Émile Zola*. The two had gone to school together in Aix, and even though their relationship had its ups and downs (there were more downs as Zola's wealth, fame and self-regard grew), an extremely strong bond existed between them for most of their lives. Danchev, the author of a well-regarded biography of Georges Braque and a professor of international relations at the University of Nottingham, has read deeply in the French 19th-century novel. Every chapter is replete with long quotations from what might seem to us rather high-flown prose and poetry, much of the latter Cézanne's own less than splendid efforts.

The connection between artists and authors worked both ways, since the world of contemporary art was very much on the minds of writers, especially Zola. Cézanne was widely believed to be the main inspiration for Claude Lantier, the brilliant, frustrated, overwrought and ultimately suicidal artist-protagonist of Zola's 1886 novel *L'Oeuvre* (usually translated in English as *His Masterpiece*). Even though Cézanne responded in a friendly way when Zola sent him a copy of the book, its publication put their relationship on permanent hold. Still, though Cézanne may have been peeved, he did not stop thinking of Zola. He simply seemed more comfortable being friends with people he didn't have to see. (Even *Pissarro*—a sweet and generous man, and one of Cézanne's best friends—ended up in the same boat.)

ONE OF THE MOST UNSETTLING events of the period was the Dreyfus Affair. It was extremely important to people at the time, and while Danchev gives it several informative pages, I wish he had delved into it even more deeply. Unfortunately Cézanne does not come out seeming entirely pure. In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army, was

convicted of treason for giving military secrets to the Germans. He was sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island and put in solitary confinement. The charges were false, but the frame-up was not acknowledged. Danchev shows us how the subsequent furor and retrial split French society, damaging friendships and revealing a very nasty underside to the culture. There were Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, and the anti-Semitic vitriol of the anti-Dreyfusards was chilling. Degas was among the most spiteful and vicious, followed closely by Renoir. Monet and Pissarro were ardent Dreyfusards, as was, famously, Zola—who in 1898 wrote the rousing open letter “J'accuse!” to the president of the French Republic. Tried for libel, the author was sentenced to a year in prison but fled to England. Pissarro, being Jewish, became the target of considerable abuse—particularly from Renoir and Degas. Cézanne did not turn on Pissarro nor publicly disparage Zola, even though he suspected his old friend of grandstanding, but he was certainly in the anti-Dreyfusard camp. In short, our contemporary notion that artists present a united progressive front was nonexistent then.

Danchev does a fine job of supplying historical context of this sort. While the book often addresses specific works of art, it does not offer any particularly startling theoretical or esthetic insights. Instead, the pictures function as necessary place-markers in Cézanne's personal development. The artist has inspired a great deal of praise from writers (Heidegger and Rilke are quoted extensively) and especially from artists. Danchev provides many appreciative comments—from Cézanne's contemporaries up through Robert Motherwell, Brice Marden and Elizabeth Murray. But once you get beyond the abundantly positive feelings, the “why” of it all somehow remains out of reach. Cézanne is at heart a mystery—an unlikely agent of momentous change, a difficult, prickly, provincial character who put visual parentheses around his observed world and thus fundamentally altered the way artists paint and draw. Danchev's book allows us to take the measure of Cézanne's life and times, and in the process to try and figure out what makes his disquieting works so undeniably great. ○

Books in Brief



JEAN ARROUYE et al.
Cézanne and Paris

Cézanne moved between Aix and Paris some 20 times. Though he rarely depicted the French capital, it had a subtle, pervasive effect on his art and career.

Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux/DAP, 2012; 224 pages, \$45.



MARYANNE STEVENS et al.
Manet: Portraying Life

Scholars link Manet's portraiture to his genre scenes, 17th-century Dutch paintings, Renoir, contemporary writers and early photography.

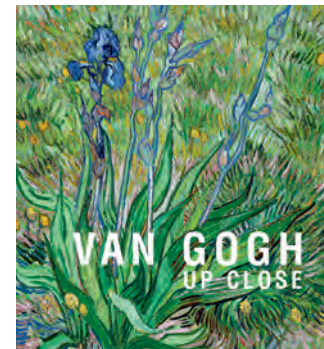
London, Royal Academy Publications, 2012; 224 pages, \$55.



DORTHE AAGESEN and REBECCA RABINOW, eds.
Matisse: In Search of True Painting

Matisse's pioneering technique is probed through close examination of more than 60 works.

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012; 272 pages, \$50.



CORNELIA HOMBURG, ed.
Van Gogh: Up Close

Experts analyze the startling use of close-up composition in the artist's final phase, 1886-90.

New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012; 306 pages, \$60.