Cézanne’s drawings at MOMA
by Karen Wilkin


In September 1906, a month before he died at the age of sixty-seven, Paul Cézanne wrote to his young painter friend Émile Bernard: “I am continually making observations from nature, and feel that I am making some slight progress.” Since this past June, we have been able to follow those observations, track that progress, and decide how slight or significant it was, as revealed by Cézanne’s works on paper throughout his life as an artist, in a spectacular overview titled “Cézanne Drawing” at the Museum of Modern Art.[1] Organized by Jodi Hauptman (Senior Curator) and Samantha Friedman (Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints), the exhibition brings together more than 250 drawings, watercolors, and sketchbook pages from international public and private collections, punctuated with the occasional especially relevant oil painting from moma’s own collection. It is accompanied by an informative, generously illustrated catalogue edited by the curators, with contributions by them and three other Cézanne scholars.

The exhibition brings to vivid life the report that Cézanne drew constantly, filling sketchbooks and independent sheets with studies from antique and Old Master works of art, images of his family, accounts of the landscape around him, and observations of miscellaneous objects and household furnishings—essentially anything that offered itself to scrutiny. We are presented with everything from passionate responses to sculptures in the Louvre to knockout studies of a headboard and bedclothes; from a dispassionate watercolor of curtains that points directly to Henri Matisse to a few forthright self-portraits; and a lot in between these extremes.
We discover how Cézanne used drawings and watercolors to test ideas for compositions and probe the component parts of future paintings. Since most of the canvases that resulted from the explorations on view at moma are familiar, many of these preliminary drawings have special resonance. A small, heavily worked pencil study, *Five Bathers* (1879–82), a tight group of standing and seated female nudes in scrappily indicated foliage, is evidence of direct preparation and transformation, since it is squared up for enlargement on a canvas. But we also recognize the familiar profile of Mont Sainte-Victoire, above a variety of different foregrounds, in a series of watercolors, and recognize, too, the workers on Cézanne’s father’s estate who became the protagonists of the card player paintings. There are casual watercolor test drives of the Metropolitan Museum’s *Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory* (1891–92) and moma’s own *Boy in a Red Vest* (1888–90), both accompanied by the paintings themselves. A trio of light-filled watercolors made between 1904 and 1906 of the gardener Vallier, seated out of doors, is joined by a small canvas that intensifies the sense of brilliant sunlight and deep shade in the works on paper. Together, the group offers a provocative challenge to the dark, saturated, thickly painted large oil portraits of Vallier, a favorite sitter during the artist’s last years, now in the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., and the Tate, London.

*Paul Cézanne, Still Life with Carafe, Bottle, and Fruit (La Bouteille de cognac), 1906, Pencil and watercolor on paper, Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation (on extended loan to the Princeton University Art Museum). Photo: Bruce M. White.*
In his sketchbooks, Cézanne sometimes combined radically different examples of all of these approaches, crowding drawings from perception, studies from other works of art, and experiments with subject matter on the same page, changing the orientation of the sheet to take advantage of available space. He could thriftily fit body parts and whole figures—copied, observed, or from his imagination—on a single sheet, or overlap a lovingly observed study of his son’s head with a small animated nude, transcribed from a work of art, and add an amply scaled report on a workaday candlestick to one side. “Cézanne Drawing” provides a near-total immersion in this part of the painter’s lifelong self-education and his thinking, since throughout the exhibition, in addition to key notebook pages, framed and installed on the wall, multiple sheets from a sketchbook that Cézanne used at various times from the 1870s until about 1900, now owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, are displayed so that they can be seen from both sides. These add counterpoint and sometimes reinforcement to the individual works on view.

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As we move through the installation, we can savor Cézanne’s many ways of using drawing: as a record of perception, as a means of capturing imagined ideas, as a visible equivalent of intense feeling—“sensation,” as he called it—always as an impassioned search. We become attuned to his different approaches and techniques. Some drawings are ferocious scrawls, while most, no less intense, are more disciplined—in a manner related to intensity rather than correctness in the usual sense; witness the slowly accumulated, stuttering strokes that conspire to suggest the limits of burgeoning forms and the concentrated, rhythmic touches of the watercolors. Whatever the medium, all the works on view read as embodiments of the single-mindedness of Cézanne’s concentration. A lone academic study—a carefully rendered, fairly inert standing male nude made in 1862, during one of the aspiring young painter’s brief engagements with formal art training—reminds us of the accepted norms of the time and underscores how dramatically different his approach was, once he was liberated from art school. All the other works in “Cézanne Drawing” reject the certainties, the sleek modeling, and the clear boundaries of the Academy, substituting instead shifting edges suggested by nervy, repeated strokes, discontinuous patches, and clear evidence of the artist’s hand. In many works, Cézanne created a wealth of varied tones with subtly adjusted, loose hatching—the monochrome equivalent of the warm and cool tones of his paintings—while in others, pencil lines act as a fragile armature, enriched and enlivened with watercolor. In the late, loose-limbed watercolors, the rhythmic act of placing repeated strokes on a surface can all but eclipse the architecture of the motif, resulting in a tension between the evocation of mass and space and the fact of paint on paper that makes these unstable, pulsing works some of the most powerful in the exhibition.

Since the show is installed thematically, we encounter impressive assemblies of related images, but the groupings also allow us to remain aware of chronology. Early on, for example, we encounter such turbocharged youthful narratives as The Murder, The Abduction, The Rape, The Temptation of Saint Anthony, and several versions of the equivocal The Eternal Feminine, all made in the 1860s and 1870s. These feverish images seem wholly unlike the cool, slowly wrought paintings of landscapes and still lifes that the name “Cézanne” immediately conjures up, yet in the context of “Cézanne Drawing,” we begin to consider them not as anomalies, but as precursors. As we encounter groups of later works, we begin to interpret the ferocity of the early narratives as persisting in disguise, transformed into the mature artist’s relentless interrogation of his motifs, his concentration on relating plane after plane of scrupulously modulated hues. (The painter Charles Cajori maintained that the disjunction of the touches of color in Cézanne’s paintings and watercolors was an embodiment of the artist’s staccato shifts of attention from the motif to the work in progress, and back again.) The dazzling selection of late, passionate, flickering watercolors of landscape and still life with which the show ends in a crescendo suggests that the progress Cézanne was making was in no way “slight,” as he had described it to Bernard. These late works, rather, are notable for both their sense of authority and their ferocity.
Paul Cézanne, Mercury after Pigalle, ca. 1890, Pencil on paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Peter Butler.
The study drawings made after works of art from the past are no less fierce than those made from nature. From the mid-1880s to the early 1890s, Cézanne focused numerous times on the seventeenth-century French sculptor Pierre Puget’s seated, twisting Hercules, in the Louvre, striving to find an equivalent on the flat page for the hefty sculpture’s massive, curved back, powerful angled legs, and spiraling pose. He was equally engaged by Puget’s even more spatially complex *Milo of Crotona*, which depicts the moment when the legendary wrestler was attacked by a lion, unable to defend himself because his hands were trapped in a tree he was attempting to split apart. Cézanne emphasizes the opposing trajectories of the limbs and body of man and beast, along with hints of the tree trunk, never committing himself to a single defining line, but plainly seeking to suggest the swell of massive musculature, the smooth bulk of carved forms, and the implication of movement, turning his interrogation of Puget’s sculpture into repeated touches that embody multiple possibilities. In the same way, drawings made circa 1890 after a seated Mercury by the eighteenth-century sculptor Jean-Baptiste Pigalle concentrate on the projections of bent legs, the twist of torso against thighs, and the massing of an elbow resting on a knee.

Once we tune in to this palpable awareness of bulk and of weighty thrusts into the viewer’s space, we realize that is exactly what Cézanne aimed at and achieved in his watercolors of groups of bathers. The exhibition includes a fine selection of these animated friezes of loosely implied, chunky body parts—chains of bodies that become near-abstract compactions of robust forms and patches of bare paper transubstantiated into flesh by touches of transparent blue wash and drifts of nervous line. In the selection of single figures of (male) nudes, some of whom also appear in the groups, the individual body is treated the same way: as a structure of almost casually linked, even more casually defined, swelling masses. moma’s deservedly celebrated canvas of a single standing, nearly nude male, *The Bather* (ca. 1885), stepping towards us against a shimmering blue and rose landscape, makes an appearance, accompanied by some tentative trial drawings of the pose, one with Mont Sainte-Victoire looming behind, and a source photograph. Perhaps because our perceptions have been heightened by the urgent drawings of Puget’s and Pigalle’s sculptures and the groups of bathers, the implied thrust of the bather’s stance is particularly evident. He seems potentially mobile, despite his singularity and verticality, as that enormous back foot propels him towards us, and we once again become aware, as we always are, of the asymmetry of his arms and hands, the slight imbalance of his shoulders, and the flurries of agitated strokes of sky and background generated by his bent elbows.

That sense of lively multiplicity and mutability announced by the bather groups is palpable throughout, especially in the gatherings of late landscape and still life watercolors, which are paradoxically at once weighty and ephemeral. The brute physicality of trees, rocks, and architecture, of dense clusters of kitchenware and fruit, of cascading drapery and of Mont Sainte-Victoire looming above the valley, is evoked by detached, transparent patches of blues, greens, and tans, by small notes of dull red, and by the white of the paper itself. It’s a palette deeply informed by the colors of Cézanne’s part of Provence, so specific that it announces the brilliant light of the region, the pale rocks, ochre earth, and dusty foliage in the still lifes as much as in the landscapes. We feel the heat, squint against the sun, and hear the cicadas buzz in a stunning group
of watercolor views of Aix from Cézanne’s studio at Les Lauves, made at the end of his life, between 1900 and 1906. Yet, as we concentrate, these uninhibited works become disembodied. The buildings of the town become unmoored, shattering into all-over expanses of rhythmic floating strokes, sometimes delicately interwoven with faint threads of pencil drawing.

Paul Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire (La Montagne Sainte-Victoire vue des Lauves) , 1902–06, Watercolor and pencil on wove paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
There are high points and masterworks throughout “Cézanne Drawing,” so much so that it’s impossible to single out any one section as unequivocally outstanding. But I found myself returning to a wall of watercolor studies of rocks above the Château Noir, near Aix-en-Provence. From about 1895 to 1900, Cézanne made many images of a particular rock face—two stacked horizontal blocks above a rounder mass—capturing his “sensation” of their weight and monumentality with flicks of line and swipes of transparent color that both suggest and contradict that weight and monumentality in provocative ways. Sometimes he backed away from his chosen motif and included more of the expanse, while other times he came so close that the stacked blocks almost fill the entire sheet. In each image of the rocks, he was attentive to a patch of warmth on the left side of the lower block (Is it sunlight? A strongly hued stone?) acknowledging it with planes of ochre or dull red. That patch of warm color is yet another revelation of the paradox of Cézanne. His work is never literal, but it is profoundly informed by the specifics of place. Cézanne was obviously inextricably attached to those specifics, but he reinvented them in terms of the act of putting paint on a surface, completely transforming, as he did so, our conceptions of what a painting could be. (Lesser artists who painted in “Cézanne’s places,” in hope of capturing some of the magic, almost always stopped with the specifics—hence the number of inert paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire, some of them by painters who should have known better. It’s worth noting that Georges Braque, who went south in search of Cézanne’s light after seeing the commemorative retrospective held the year after his death, never painted the mountain.)

I was compelled to return, too, to a row of drawings, some enhanced with watercolor, of the plaster Cupid (a cast after what was then thought to be a sculpture by Puget) that Cézanne kept in his studio, the dominant form in the eponymous 1894 masterpiece in the Courtauld Gallery, London. I have long been in the thrall of the Courtauld picture, with its astonishing tipped space, compressed scales, and deliberate confusion between representations of works of art and responses to actual objects, so it was particularly exciting to see Cézanne coming to grips with his eventual subject. Just as he did with the sculptures he studied in the Louvre, he drew the gently spiraling, armless sculpture from many different viewpoints: turning the profiles of chubby legs, buttocks, belly, and wavy hair, visible from some views, into chains of loose curves; emphasizing elsewhere the longer, suaver curves of limbs and torso revealed by other angles. Several of the drawings of the Cupid have minimally indicated background planes of blue and ochre, with the white of the paper standing for the pale plaster.

“Cézanne Drawing” is large and demanding, requiring multiple visits, if possible. But it is also remarkably intimate and immediate. The singular “drawing,” in the title, changes the word from noun to verb. If we pay attention, cumulatively, the exhibition presents a rare opportunity to watch as the artist slowly educated his hand and his eye, internalizing works from the past, experimenting with unprecedented ideas, and transforming established conceptions of the work of art from a scrupulous report on actuality to an autonomous, powerful evocation of individual perception and respons
“Cézanne Drawing” opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on June 6 and remains on view through September 25, 2021.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 40 Number 1, on page 90
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