

Cézanne's Statement of Aesthetic Theory

Classic Text

Paul Cézanne widely discussed statement in a letter to Emile Bernard¹, dated 15th April, 1904, has been utilized as an intellectual springboard for *Cubism* and *Abstraction*: “*Treat nature by means of cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything brought into proper perspective so that each side of an object or a plane is directed towards a central point.*”

The above quotations from Cézanne's letter² has been selected to give the extraordinary influence on Abstract art, which is markedly bound up with his abandonment of scientific perspective.

The Cylinder, Sphere, and Cone

Though the above oft-quoted statement has been seen as anticipating the advent of Cubism and abstract art, it is best understood as a prescription for reducing the imperfect forms of the natural world to essential shapes. Far from being a revolutionary idea, this was a standard method of creating order and harmony in painting. Obviously it has directed attention to the necessity of basing a composition on the relations between simple, geometric shapes. We should not assume, however, that Cézanne could ever have conceived of the idea of making a picture out of triangles, circles, and squares. Some Cubists' landscapes strongly influenced by Cézanne, such as Pablo Picasso (Plate 1), Jean Metzinger (Plate 2), Georges Barque and André Derain.

(Plate 1) Pablo Picasso, Factory, 1909

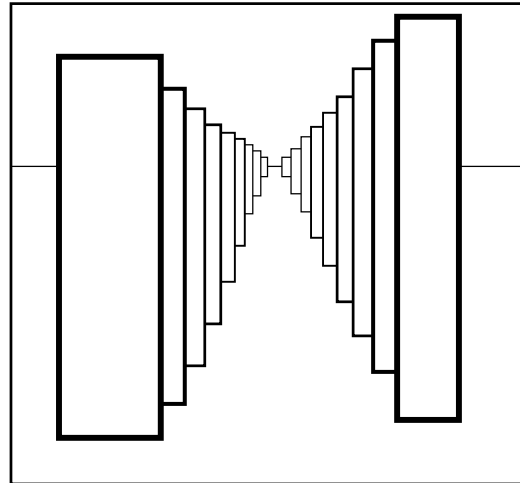


(Plate 2) Jean Metzinger, Cubist Landscape, 1911



Cézanne's Perspective Distortion

Cézanne eliminated destructive converging lines, as well as lines that would seem to expand out picture plane or beyond the confines of the picture format. His planes move around in the picture space without coming to a dead stop; actually, they are not directed “toward a central point”. Taking literally the part of the quotation just repeated, one might suppose that he meant to create the sort of funnels and dead ends in space that can be found in so much second-rate painting based on scientific perspective. (Details see diagram³ on the right hand side) Quite to the contrary, Cézanne’s space is compensated, balanced, related to the picture plane; and thus often rotates around, not toward, a central point. I do not see how we can interpret his statement as anything but a contradiction of his work.



Funnel effect and a hole in the picture

Geometrical Theory of Art

For the Cubists, then, the most general usage of “**the fourth dimension**”⁴ was to indicate a higher reality, a transcendental truth that was to be discovered individually by each artist, as Gleizes and Metzinger explain. “*For the partial liberties conquered by Cézanne, Courbet, Manet and the impressionists, Cubism substitutes an indefinite liberty,*”⁵ Gleizes and Metzinger had declared in *Du Cubisme*. That this new freedom for the artist was a product of his unique ability to discern the fourth dimension is confirmed by Apollinaire’s April 1912 statement that “*it is to the fourth dimension alone that we owe this new norm of the perfect.*”

To understand Cézanne is to foresee cubism. Cézanne’s last paintings and his watercolors belong to cubism. When, in the longer term, Cubism and modern art moved away from all Post-Impressionist systems of small-unit, or ‘divisionist’ structure, it was the wider implications of Cézanne’s art that maintained his status as ‘**father of modern art**’.

Reference Books:

- (1) Rewald, John
Paul Cézanne Letters
Da Capo Press, 1995.
- (2) Wadley, Nicholas
The painting of Cézanne
Mallard Press, 1989.
- (3) Fry, Edward F.
Cubism
Thames and Hudson, 1978.
- (4) Henderson, Linda Dalrymple
The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art
Princeton University Press, 1983.

Notes:

¹ The young painter Emile Bernard (1868-1941), formerly a friend of Van Gogh and Gauguin, was a fervent admirer of Cézanne, about whom he had written his first article in 1892, long before they had met. In 1904, returning from a long stay in Italy and Egypt, he visited Cézanne in Aix with his wife and two children and stayed for a month. Always deeply involved in philosophical and religious thought, Bernard seems to have had long theoretical discussions with Cézanne, which he attempted to continue in his letters. Although Cézanne had little taste for such speculations and discreetly made this apparent in his answers, Bernard's questions did in fact make him express his own views about painting.

² Paul Cézanne Letters edited by John Rewald, p.301.

³ The diagram is a configuration of overlapping planes that recede toward a vanishing point at the horizon. The exaggerated effect of deep space is the result of an uncompensated perspectival convergence and diminishing of sizes. The diagram illustrates what is meant by a funnel effect and a hole in the picture.

⁴ The most extensive French descriptions of an artistic fourth dimension were given by Apollinaire: "The new painters do not propose, any more than predecessors, to be geometers. But it may be said that geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the art of the writer. Today, scholars no longer limit themselves to the three dimensions of Euclid. The printers have been led quite naturally, one might say by intuition, to preoccupy themselves with the new possibilities of spatial measurement which, in the language of the modern studios, are designated by the term fourth dimension.

⁵ Gleizes and Metzinger, *Du Cubisme*, p.43; *Cubism*, in *M.A. on A.*, p.18.