

## Distortion of Forms and Subjects in Paul Cezanne's Paintings

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**Abstract:** Paul Cezanne is the 19<sup>th</sup> century painter born in France who was a very important figure in the history of modern art. He had painted so many paintings like landscapes, portraits and still life. The figures and forms in his artwork do resemble the real world but the distortion is the most significant feature. The subject matters reveal the changes and gives emphasis upon forms. Subjects lack likeness and negate imitation as art followed by predecessors. The flatness and geometric forms are amplified along with expression in the paintings. The formal distortion played a vital role to give birth to Modernism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Art. So, he is called "Father of Modern Art"

**Keywords:** Cubism, distortion, Post-Impressionism, Impressionism, Formalism,

### Introduction

In the paintings of Paul Cezanne, the subjects and forms do not resemble the real world. The Human figures, still life and natural landscape were not imitated as realist painters do. Rather those forms are distorted. He is considered as the Post-Impressionist artist evolved during the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century and till the beginning decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

"One of the most influential artists in the history of modern painting, Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) has inspired generations of artists. Generally categorized as a Post-Impressionist, his unique method of building form with color and his analytical approach to nature influenced the art of Cubists, Fauves, and successive generations of avant-garde artists." (Voorhies, 2004)

The books related with his paintings and his biography is chosen as secondary sources and the photographs of paintings printed in the books and internet were observed to analyze and discuss. The objectives of the study is to explore the feature of Cezanne's artworks and it seems important to analyze the content and forms too. Because the distortion of figures and forms are seemingly vivid still in paintings in present time. Theoretical framework to study the artworks of Cezanne is imitation theory. According to which, the subjects of painting like humans, natural world objects, mountains, rivers trees and buildings as well as still life paintings' subjects like pots, fruits and other still objects are imitated with exactness and likeness.

Generally, his paintings can seem done by armature artists for the viewers who have not seen the Impressionist paintings like by Monet, Manet, Pissaro and Degas which were in the peak after mid1870s. In the Impressionist paintings also, the figures can be seen distorted because the colors and forms used are very rough. because those paintings were made just to capture the light, moments and done directly from outside the studio or in the field. Until the half of 18<sup>th</sup> century and till for a few decades realistic paintings were considered good. But the revolutionary changes took place in the European art world in nature imitation or copying exactly like the real world and subjects after Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. The terms like *Impressionism* and *Post-Impressionism* were coined by art critics and scholars of that era after looking at characteristics of formal structure of artwork.

This is qualitative research and the purpose of the research is intended to describe and discuss the artworks, especially paintings. Facts are studied through observation of influential paintings by the artist published in online sources. As tools of library research method, books and online articles are studied. The imitation theory is applied to deal with the artworks.

### Paul Cezanne:

Paul Cezanne was one of the prominent artists whose paintings are characterized as Post-Impressionist by scholars of Art. Before discussing paintings made by him, it is worth knowing briefly about his life and art career too. Nicolas Nonhoff states about Cezanne,

*"the 19<sup>th</sup> century leading painter was indeed the powerful artist of western art history. Cezanne had no economic problems as the son of a prosperous banker of Ex-en-Provence which was located in the Southern part of France. Though he did not have economic problems, family did not support to become an artist. So, in 1858 he started studying law despite his wish to study art. When he began studying law he started to criticize it and in the evenings he joined art classes run by a local art teacher named Ghibert where he learned life paintings. Likewise, he copied old paintings in the Art Museum of Ex-en Provence. Nonhoff, P. No. 14-15)*

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Cezanne went to Paris to join the most famous art academy named Ecole-de-Beaux but after rejection, he took admission in another art institute. In the art museum, he tried to learn art by copying the paintings of Eugene Delacroix and Peter Paul Rubens. In Paris, he was befriended with Impressionist Painters. (Nonhoff, 1999, p. 13)

He had struggled for the successful career in the art world. His paintings were rejected by established art museums of that era in Paris. Sir Lawrence Gowing gives an account about exhibition and rejection of his painting in a famous art exhibition space named Salon-de- Autumn many times. While in 1882, Cezanne had succeeded to exhibit only painting in art galleries. Only in 1904. His paintings were selected. In the gallery named New Lafite, he ran a one-man painting exhibition in 1890. Café named Café Bourgeoise in Paris he had mate Impressionist Artists. (Gowing, 2002, p. 115). Cezanne had passed away in 1906. In his life, he was successful only in the final decades of his art career.

**Post- Impressionism:**

In general terms Post-Impressionism is the art movement after Impressionism. About the development of this, in Lawry Adams' opinion, like Impressionists, Post-Impressionists also used vibrant colors and clear brushstrokes. But most of the Post-Impressionist forms and figures do not mix with each other and their edges are separated by clear line, colors which have impacted Cezanne's paintings. (Adams, p.35)

**Paintings of Paul Cezanne:**

In contrast to post-Impressionists, the raw colors were directly from tubes. But Cezanne liked mature colors and solid shapes. About his works, artist Manuj Babu Mishra states that he did not like the mixed colors in the open sky. So, to achieve the more solid and alive Impressionism he was headed for exploration. (Mishra, p. 386-387).

Mishra stated further about the distortion appearing in paintings by Cezanne that he did not leave the impressionist approach but distortions of forms he always did in creating paintings and succeeded to achieve originality in style and content. (Mishra, nd, p. 386)

Paul Cezanne was indeed a key artist to trigger the beginning of Modernism followed by Cubism in significant movements in Abstract art. He had played with fundamental principles of drawing and painting. Modernism was the art movement evolved in Europe which negated the previous way of creating art by imitation of real world with imagination. Cubism was developed in the France in second decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The objects were heavily distorted and all facets of objects and figures were depicted flatly in picture plain. Cezanne's style of depicting forms in geometric forms is the seed of Cubism. His contribution to abstract art in which no identical and recognizable forms from real the world is depicted. Rather abstract art is the visualization of ideas, concepts and feelings by using only elements of painting like line, color, texture, space and form.

Andrew Graham (2008) has written that Cezanne's way of painting the figure repeatedly and conventional rule of perspective was distorted, which was his original experiment. Likewise, he distorted the forms and subjects which influenced later generation Modernist painters as well as directed the ways toward Cubism and Abstract art. Among Post-Impressionist painters, he was considered a Great Artist and even the Father of Modern Art (Graham, 2008, p. 368).

Paul Cezanne's paintings were like done by unskilled artist which often have subjects like violence and sex. He even played with ratio and proportion. The volume, weight and solidity of forms were contrasted with Impressionist paintings as opined by Gowing (Gowing, 2002, p.115).

The painting entitled 'Bathers' (Figure 1) is one of Cezanne's famous paintings. In this artwork, he has colored the canvas with light blue hues in backdrop landscape with rough brush strokes. The nude bathing women seemed relaxed and basked the sun after taking a bath.

*His Bathers (1976.201.12) of 1874–75 demonstrates a developed style and tonal scale in one of his first paintings of this theme, which recurs in his oeuvre. The landscape of Bathers has the brilliance of plein-air painting, while the figures, drawn from the artist's imagination (Cézanne rarely painted nudes from life), reconcile themselves within this setting. The complex process of drawing inspiration from these two sources, nature and memory, would occupy Cézanne in his later work. (Voorhies, 2004)*

The little nude figures of women are also visible across the lake. The clouds and distant church and trees are blurred with faded blue, mixed green and yellow cohere color. Just behind two groups of nudes, there are trunks of tree which is bent diagonally upward and suggests a triangle. The bodies of women look like cylinders and they are much more distorted. Some of them are very unusual in natural shape which do not follow the likeness of realistic woman figure.

The detailed depiction of parts of faces like eyes and noses are avoided, so no facial expression can be felt. While looking at entire composition the flatness can be seen. The ground where bathers are sitting, sleeping and standing seems avoiding perspective in color as well as the proportion of body is negated. The distortion of human figures is so hard, and incompleteness is vivid.

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Cezanne had also paintings which depicted natural landscapes and houses but the distortion in principles of painting like rejecting rule of perspective. According to the rule of perspective, the shapes of object become smaller in distance and the colors are also faded and the figures closer to us should be bigger in size. Likewise, the color of objects should be brighter and vibrant. (Figure 2).

But in this landscape does not imitate the reality of nature and houses. Rather the town with country side houses in front of it has similar Red-Brown colored roofs with shades faded bluish and yellow cohere. The skies with light blue colors and trees in between houses and around are painted with rough brush-strokes. All the shapes of houses are inter- linked and connected with each other.

The perspective of shapes and colors are rejected. They do not resemble real world. Very little use of shades are the key features of this painting.

Another significant work by Cezanne is painting entitled 'The Card Players' (Figure 3) which was also an oil painting like two paintings above. The blue color mixed with dusty yellow and brown are apparently applied with rough brushstrokes. In contrary of the painting of town above seems incomplete, the card players seem more finished. But the blue colors are dark in the man's cloth in the right side of painting. There are three middle-aged men playing card. They are busy at seeing cards while the person behind is looking from above. In the interior, we can see sky blue wall and brown curtain squeezed in right side wall. Four pipes are hanging on the wall. A person in behind is also smoking pipe. All four men are wearing same type of hat though colors are different. The colors applied in this painting and the costumes suggests the cold weather.

Most important feature of this painting is flatness and the distortion of images. The colors in the table does not follow the rule of perspective which can be seen in application of blue color in coats worn by players. The eyes, nose and other parts of body like fingers are also do not follow realistic imitation from human body. Simplicity and flatness appear in every part of form as well as the inter-connection of subject and form is the most remarkable style of Cezanne's style.

**Conclusion**

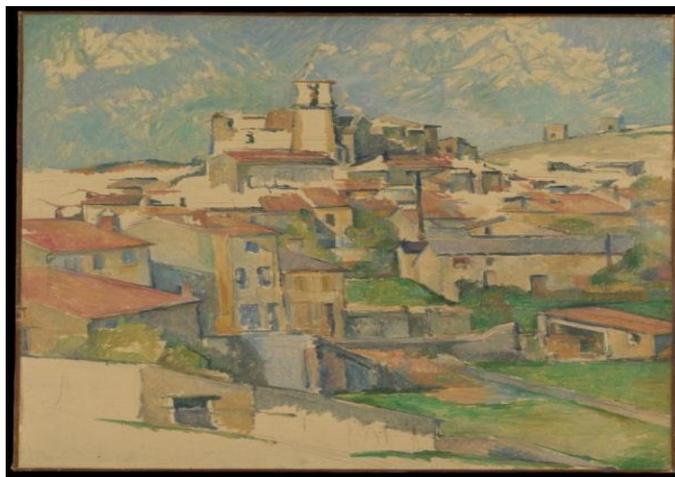
The subjects of his paintings are many more but the still life objects which is not discussed here. Domination of subjects like human figure, nude woman, both interior of room and houses, town, natural landscape occupies his creation. The colors are always mixed and hazy which suggests the maturity and solidity. Most of the figures and forms are separated with dark colored lines though they have connectivity with each other. That means sometimes the figures do not seem freely existed. Rather, they are entangled which is certainly following imitation of nature and external visual world objects. The distortion of forms and figures and the rejection of fundamental principles of painting like perspective and proportion are major characteristics.

The exact colors of subjects are often avoided with simplicity and both figures and forms in foreground and background are painted with similar color. The geometric shapes are often visible in creating artwork. The details in human body are replaced by rough and simple brushstrokes. Cezanne's colors are mature and mixed but muddy tones are played. Forms and subjects do not have likeness as in reality and the texture is always rough. Some paintings even look incomplete.

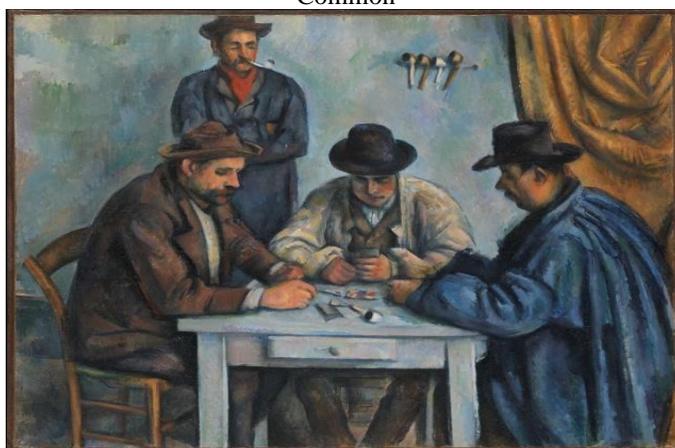
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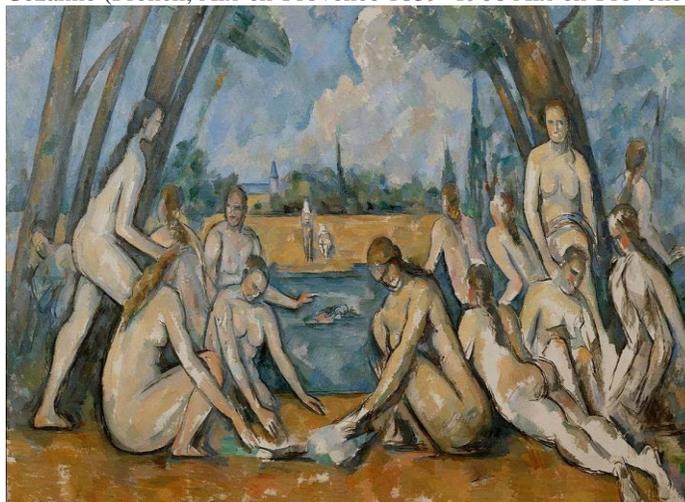
Appendix



*Figure 1* Cézanne, The Bathers, 1898–1905, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, United States. Wikimedia Common



*Figure 2* Gardanne Paul Cézanne (French, Aix-en-Provence 1839–1906 Aix-en-Provence) 1885–86, Oil on canvas



*Figure 3* The Card Players, 1890–92, Paul Cézanne ,French