

Postimpressionism:
paul cezanne (1839-
1906) and georges
seurat (1859-61)
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Postimpressionism, an umbrella term coined by British art critic Roger Fry, refers to an innovative group of an artist working in France in the late 19th-early 20th centuries. Schooled in Impressionisms, these artists grew dissatisfied with the passive, formless registration of perceptual experience practiced by the Impressionists and took their art into different directions. Although crediting the Impressionists with the use of pure brilliant colors and light, they strove to express emotions rather than optical impressions.

As Harvard Arnason notes: “ Instead, they sought to discover, or recover, a new and more complete reality, one that would encompass the inner world of mind and spirit as well as the outer world of physical substance and sensation” (Arnason 64). There are no clearly defined elements of style and subject matter in Post-Impressionism. However, the art critics agree that the emphasis on combination of simplified colors, accent on formal quality and used by the artists techniques achieve a renewed aesthetic sense as well as abstract tendencies in Postimpressionist paintings.

Generally, Post-Impressionism is defined as more formal and more emotionally charged comparing to Impressionisms. My research interests lies in Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) and Georges Seurat (1859-61) Paul Cezanne (1839-1906), an enigmatic and tragic figure of the art world, achieved astonishing posthumous success. Acknowledged as a great constructor and colorists, one of the most penetrating observers and one of the subtlest minds, he was an isolated, prone to depression man of a sometime violent disposition. On many occasions he used to say: “ Life is fearful” and “ Nothing is easy” (Johnson 606).

Cezanne exhibited with the Impressionists but refused to identify himself with the movement. He considered Impressionism being “ too pretty and superficial, adding “ I want to make of Impressionism something solid and enduring like the art in museums” (Johnson 604). Lack of three-dimensional depth in paintings led him to consider Impressionism formless and insubstantial, lacking qualities of Western paintings. Although paying respect to old masters (he was a serious student of art of the past), he did not intend to imitate them.

His pursuit was a kind of expression based on, but different from, that of the Impressionists. Few artists loved painting and nature more than Cezanne. Substantial fortune from his wealthy banker father allowed Cezanne to retire to his native Aix-en-Provence and fully focus on art rather than strive for commercial success. Nature was his search for solace and perfection and his primary focus. Portraits, still life and nudes were also among his subjects. In all of them, he was concerned with the re-creation, the realization, of the scene, the object, or the person. All things, particularly in art, are theory developed and applied in contact with nature. Painting is not only to copy the object, it is to seize a harmony between numerous relations”, stated Cezanne (articons. com). In his view, deep emotional experience is primal in creative process: it renders subject with intensity the intellect joins in later to create finished work of art. As one critic states “ he talked of humanizing a landscape through the exercise of an artist’s feelings” (articons. com). Through his use of color and space combination Cezanne achieved an extraordinary degree of landscape expressiveness.

He is known for geometric view of objects and spatial analysis: “ Deal with nature as cylinders, spheres and cones, all placed in perspective so that each aspect of an object or plane goes towards a central point” (Johnson 604). The artist was not thinking of these geometric shapes as the end results. It was an implication of the final abstraction into which he wanted to translate the images. The Cubists, in fact, took his advice to heart crediting him as inspiration. Another mean of expression was color. His use of primary colors of reds, yellows and blues produced vibration of light, which added depth to the surface of the painting.

Variation in value contrasts and hues employed by Cezanne also optically defined depth and contour of shapes without traditional outline lines. Looking at the The Bay from L’Estaque (artchive. com) one can notice that color planes slide into each other unifying surface and depth and defining forms at the same time. The painting can be read as panorama in depth. It was not achieved by Impressionists. One of the famous Cezanne’s stills Life with Basket of Apples is another reference to geometric view approach. It is said apple obsessed Cezanne as three-dimensional form.

He found it difficult to assimilate it into the unity of canvas. As a solution, he created circular forms using small flat brushstrokes that slightly distorted the shape and loosened the contours to unify color areas. Looking at this painting, one can notice distortion of the perspective: a plate and change of direction of the table edge as it moves under the cloth. These inconsistencies do not diminish the significant visual experience. Mentioning application of perspective, Cezanne generally used to sabotage the structure of it implying prevalence of spectator’s subjective view.

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His portraits illustrate it: The Card Players (globalgallery. com). The artist admitted to struggling with drawings and perspective in particular. He believed single-point linear perspective was misleading and developed an alternative one known as “ internal perspective”. There is not specific definition of what he meant by this term. In my understanding, he implied that figure ground relationship and space perception is based on a spectator’s view, not the mathematical accuracy of depiction. It was his emotional interpretation of objects and their relationships and tensions in the picture plane.

In general, in his portraying of individuals Cezanne never emphasized the socio-critical comment that was obvious in the works of many of his contemporary colleagues (artcyclopedia. com). There are mixed reviews of his “ nudes”. Although theme of bathers fascinated him, he was incapable of being alone in the room with the models. As a result, his paintings were based on schoolboys’ drawings, engraving and quick sketches. Some critics find his “ nudes” stiff and awkward, anatomically incorrect and grotesque.

Cezanne’s paintings were done in oils and watercolor, of which he was enthusiastic though unskilled practitioner. Regardless of the medium, his works are fascinating. Cezanne’s highly emotional view of objects, emphasis on formalistic qualities, simplified colors and innovative techniques distinguish him as an influential Post-impressionist artist. Many critics regard Cezanne as a father of Modern Art implying his courage to break the accepted norms: opposition against the accepted rules of perspective and his geometric view, the influence of which is often seen as a precursor of modern art, especially Cubism.

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George Seurat (1859-61) is another representative of Postimpressionism. Like Cezanne he was seeking to stretch Impressionistic boundaries and give formal expression to his ideas and intuitions. Contrary to Cezanne's posthumous fame, Seurat achieved success and produced astonishing body of art in his short lifetime of 31 years. Like his counterpart, Seurat came from a wealthy background. His preference lied in city life of Paris rather than suburban seclusion. Sharing Cezanne's respect for " old masters", Seurat took it a step further diversifying his experiences.

He was trained in academic art traditions, was a devotee of classic Greek sculpture, had interests in masters of black and white (Rembrandt to Goya) and learned principles of mural design and mosaics. His subjects differed from Cezanne' but they also did not imply social commentary. Great majority of them were contemporary life of middle class Parisians: leisure (La Grande Jute) and entertainment (Le Chanute). Like Cezanne, Seurat was striving for emotional expression.

He achieved it through scientific approach- application of color- comparing to Cezanne's apparent disregard for science- laws of perspective. Seurat became fascinated by theories and principals of color origination/combination and its aesthetics. He studied contemporary research in optics: the treaties of Charles Henry, Eugene Chervil and Ogden Rood. Rational scientific basis appealed to Seurat; however, he was not a cold methodical theorist. His integration of science and emotions was a new technique named pointillism, also referred as divisionism: placing tiny dots of pure colors adjacent to one another.

As a result “ the tiny juxtaposed dots of multi- colored paint allowed the eye of the spectator to blend colors optically, rather than having the colors blended on the canvas or pre-blended as a material pigment” (wikipedia. com). These separate touches of interwoven pigment would result in a greater vibrancy of color: “ pulsating shimmer of light on the canvas” (metmuseum. org). The precise, meticulous application of dots and color combinations created depth and volume in his paintings. Comparing to Cezanne, whose color tool was contrast, Seurat emphasized harmonious palette.

He believed that color creates harmony and emotion in art in the same way as sound and tempo create harmony in music. A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jute (Bergson 117) is union of his emotional view and technical mastery. Some spectators find this painting hauntingly beautiful. It is an astonishing size-size dichotomy: a monumental painting size (9×10) and tiniest dots of color that bring this scene alive. No wonder Seurat worked over a year on this painting. He visited the site very often to study the scene and to create preparatory contour drawings and sketches.

The composition is balanced; all elements are unified. Comparing to Cezanne, Seurat adheres to the rules of one-point linear perspective to create pictorial space. Like Cezanne, he avoided apparent contour lines though. Instead he used shading to achieve soft, harmonious effect to distinguish figures and, at the same time, unify them with the background. In his painting, La Chahut (bkm), the color dots are very large. It creates the effect of figures dissolving in the color patterns of dots. The painting depicts a popular Parisian dance, possibly can-can.

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Seurat employs ascending lines: dancers' legs. Based on then popular theory, ascending lines were supposed to induce feeling of gaiety in spectators. Generally, dance moves depiction creates decorative rhythmic pattern to this painting (Arnason 66). Seurat's medium was oil paint and dry Conte crayon, comparing to Cezanne's oil and watercolor preferences. Seurat's art was considered a reform of Impressionism. Building on the Impressionistic use of color and brushstrokes, he propelled himself to a different level defined as Neo-Impressionism under the umbrella of Post-Impressionism.

Like Cezanne, he was an enigmatic master of emotional expression and color. However, he was the most scientific and objective of all the painters of his times and also one of the most poetic. Concluding analysis of both masters, it is obvious to mention their shared stylistic characteristics of Postimpressionism: emotional expression, formalistic view and innovative techniques. However, as any artists, each of them was defined by individualistic styles: Cezanne- geometric view, contrasting colors and internal perspective; Seurat- pointillism and color harmony.