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Cézanne among the artists

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Paul Cézanne’s association with the dealer Ambroise Vollard made Vollard’s fortune and contributed to making the artist famous. How much the dealer was responsible for Cézanne’s fame (and the market it generated), however, is open for debate. There is no doubt that the three Cézanne shows at Vollard’s Paris gallery, beginning with the first, held in November-December 1895, coincided with the sharp escalation in the artist’s prices. Other factors, however, also assisted Cézanne’s market fortunes—including such landmarks as the purchase of a Cézanne landscape in 1897 by Berlin’s Nationalgalerie. Artists, too, contributed at least as much to forging Cézanne’s market as Vollard did. It is Cézanne’s relationships with his fellow artists, and how they may have changed as a consequence of the Vollard shows that I want to explore.

In his memoirs Vollard claimed that it was his idea to give Cézanne—the last great painter of the Impressionist generation to receive such recognition—a solo show. The idea for the exhibition, Vollard wrote, was inspired by the hostile reception to the news of the posthumous donation to the French museum of modern art, the Luxembourg, of the collection of the painter Gustave Caillebotte, a collection that included five Cézannes.

The state art administration indeed reluctantly received the gift, and claiming space limitations and numerical equities, eventually accepted only a little more than half of the donation, thirty-eight of the sixty-seven paintings and pastels by Manet, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Sisley, Degas, and Cézanne. Three of the five Cézannes, including Bathers at Rest, were refused. Vollard probably showed all three paintings in the first Cézanne exhibition, borrowing them from Renoir, the estate’s executor.

As with many of Vollard’s recollections in regard to Cézanne, we cannot accept the dealer’s account without reservations. First, the uproar over the Caillebotte legacy did not really occur until the truncated collection went on display in the Luxembourg galleries in 1897, several years after the first Cézanne show. Second, by 1895 there were already a small number of collectors showing interest in Cézanne’s pictures. The market for Cézanne’s paintings was held back by the fact that few of the
artist’s works had ever been sold and that Cézanne now lived in relative isolation, mostly in the south of France. Vollard, therefore, made his fortune because he got into the Cézanne market just before his competitors and, more importantly, because he was the first to gain access to the hundreds of paintings stacked in Cézanne’s studios in Paris and Aix-en-Provence. For a period of about seven years, Vollard retained exclusive access to Cézanne’s pictures, during which time over half of all the artist’s paintings passed through the dealer’s hands.

Finally, and most importantly, when Vollard opened his small shop on the rue Laffitte in the early 1890s he was fortunate enough (and wise enough) to accept the advice and patronage of all the key Impressionist painters.

The first was Berthe Morisot, who helped the dealer arrange with the artist’s widow a small Manet show. Apparently through Morisot, Vollard met Camille Pissarro, and in the several years preceding the first Cézanne exhibition, Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Claude Monet, who all appear to have promoted Cézanne both to Vollard and to their collector friends. For example, Renoir’s son later wrote that his father claimed responsibility for persuading Vollard to give Cézanne an exhibition. We also know that beginning in 1894 Monet promoted Cézanne to the critics, artists, and collectors who gathered at his home in Giverny. In the fall of that year Monet invited Cézanne to Giverny to paint with him and to meet such luminaries as Auguste Rodin and the politician Georges Clemenceau, as well as such critics as Gustave Geffroy. Geffroy had already published the first substantial appreciation of Cézanne’s work, perhaps at Monet’s urging, in March 1894, that is, a year and a half before the first Vollard show; the artist reciprocated by painting Geffroy’s portrait in the late spring of 1895.

When the Cézanne show opened at Vollard’s late in 1895, the artist’s Impressionist friends not only brought potential collectors to Vollard’s shop to see the exhibition, they all bought Cézannes, either directly out of the exhibition, or in the months that followed. Degas, for example, who owned no Cézannes prior to 1895, purchased seven paintings, plus at least one watercolor,
either at or within several years of the first exhibition. Mary Cassatt, Pissarro, and Renoir all purchased at least one painting, while Monet would buy as many as nine Cézannes over the course of the next decade.

In fact, I can think of no other artist who has had his work collected by as many artists and in such numbers as Cézanne did. As has often been said, Cézanne was a painter’s painter. But it helped that for a very long time one could buy the artist’s work for very little: until the end of the century, a Cézanne generally cost no more than what one could expect to pay for a young artist’s work fresh out of art school.

The largest artist collections belonged to painters who knew Cézanne well. Chief among these was the collection of Camille Pissarro, Cézanne’s teacher and friend, who owned as many as nineteen Cézannes, only perhaps eight of which he acquired through purchase or trade. The others Pissarro would have received as gifts from the painter, or they were merely left behind with Pissarro by Cézanne after he had given up working on them. Only after 1882, when Cézanne and Pissarro ceased to work together, did Pissarro begin to purchase his Cézannes. In 1884 he wrote to his son Lucien that he had bought four Cézannes, which he called “studies,” and described as “very peculiar.” Unfortunately we can’t identify these pictures. In the wake of the Vollard show, Pissarro purchased or traded for four additional Cézannes. What is significant here is that all the Cézannes we are certain Pissarro possessed, either as gifts or through purchase, were painted in the early 1880s or before.

Cézanne also gave Renoir most of his much smaller collection of paintings, as well as Turning Road at Roche-Guyon, which the artist abandoned, following a brief stay at Renoir’s studio in the village in 1885. As an aside, I think it is important to note that Cézanne did not engage in a reciprocal practice. He owned not a single work by any of the Impressionists. In fact the only work of art by a major artist in his possession at the time of his death was a flower study by Delacroix, given to him in 1902 by Vollard. And while Pissarro and Renoir both painted Cézanne’s portrait, with the exception of a small drawing, Cézanne did not return the
compliment.

What an artist owns by another artist is not a foolproof guide to what that artist admires in the other artist's work. There are too many variables, such as price, availability, and interest, which go into forming any collection. Yet I think artists' collections can reveal certain attitudes, particularly when the artist collected had such a long and continually evolving career as Cézanne's had. Paintings from late in his career have strikingly different characteristics than those he painted early on. Cézanne was also unique among 19th-century French painters in producing important works divided relatively evenly among four genres: still lifes, landscapes, figure painting, and portraits. Artist collectors of Cézannes, like other collectors, often betrayed distinct preferences for early or late works and for one or several genres in favor of the others. As I have noted, Pissarro bought only the artist's early paintings. He seems however to have given no genre particular preference. This preference for the early work suggests that Pissarro never fully understood the painter Cézanne eventually became, the painter first revealed, in fact, at the Vollard show in 1895.

Mary Cassatt, on the other hand, whose enthusiasm for Cézanne's work was less than that of the other Impressionists, bought only still lifes, perhaps three in all. Still lifes were clearly the artist's most accessible genre. Her only later painting by Cézanne is this one, probably painted around 1890. But it is hard to gauge whether or not Cassatt showed any daring in buying this picture, with its skewed perspective and unfinished passages (such as the upper neck of the bottle), or whether she was simply able to obtain the painting from Vollard at an affordable price because it was judged to be unfinished.

One of the most important factors determining artist collections was that there were two distinct and widely separate periods in which they had access to Cézanne's paintings. The first period dates from roughly around 1877, at the time of Cézanne's participation in the second Impressionist exhibition, and ends in the summer of 1882 when Cézanne appears to have painted...
alongside Pissarro for the last time. This is when Caillebotte, for example, acquired all his Cézannes. Interestingly, following Cézanne’s decision not to show with the Impressionists in the fourth exhibition in 1879 (Cézanne also did not show in the remaining four exhibitions) Caillebotte, for whatever reason, ceased to buy any more of Cézanne’s work.

After 1882, Cézanne spent the very great majority of his time working alone, and usually in Aix-en-Provence. And because, after 1882, Cézanne’s paintings, with several inconsequential exceptions, were not publicly exhibited in Paris until 1895, artists who bought Cézanne’s work early on were familiar with one kind of painter, while artists who bought later, after the Vollard show, could see a remarkably different artist. The later Cezannes display considerably more ambition, more self-confidence, a profoundly independent experimentation. Compare any of the artist’s pictures from the beginning of the 1880s, like this view of the Hermitage at Pontoise (which Pissarro owned) with the artist’s pictures from the mid-1880s forward, such as this landscape painted around the time of the first Vollard show, and one discovers that while Cézanne displays a remarkable consistency of artistic interests, there is also an extraordinary refinement and maturation of ideas and technique.

While still working with Pissarro, Cézanne had already begun liberating his brushwork from the objects they were intended to describe. Some passages in his paintings from the late 1870s and early 1880s hint at the spatial dislocations engendered by the artist’s shifting perspective that became routine later on. Yet, in the late 1880s, Cézanne’s palette became richer, his confidence in his compositional abilities stronger, so that whereas in this 1881 painting, Cézanne relies on a greater harmony of local color and pairs greens of different value with only an occasional touch of a complementary color to highlight or accent a passage, in his later works it is often difficult even to define what might be considered the local color of a specific area, because any one passage is composed of a complex sequence of color, which Cézanne, moreover, used throughout the painting. It has been said that Cézanne had more distinct colors on his palette than any other
19th-century artist, which the painter applied in a regular sequence to achieve the effect he called modulation.

It is easy to understand and admire an artist’s early work from the perspective of his old-age style, but what if Cézanne had happened to die in, say, 1883? I think it would have been likely that we would remember the artist as an eccentric and modestly influential painter, but certainly not as the most important painter of the late 19th century.

Between 1882 and 1894, Cézanne had only occasional contact with the other impressionists. So, for more than a decade, Cézanne had all but removed himself from the Parisian art world; his presence there was almost entirely represented by a handful of the artist’s old pictures, carelessly stacked in a tiny paint shop. In the years immediately following the 1877 Impressionist exhibition, Cézanne, in want of a dealer, and in need of money, deposited a number of his pictures at the paint shop of the now famous père Tanguy, to whom he was also in substantial debt, having taken his art supplies from Tanguy on credit. When the artist was not occupying his Paris studio he left the key with Tanguy, should anyone show interest in buying his pieces. Before 1895, if one did not know the painter, most purchases of Cézanne’s works were made through Tanguy, where, for example, Paul Gauguin acquired at least four of his Cézannes, and where Paul Signac and the Belgian painter Eugène Boch purchased theirs, as well, probably, as Pissarro’s four “curious studies.” Unfortunately, we have no business records to tell us what Cézannes Tanguy had in his shop; because of this, the provenance of only a handful of Cézanne’s paintings include Tanguy’s name. What we do know is that at the time of his death in 1894, Tanguy possessed just six Cézannes, none of them dating later than 1881. This suggests that the large majority of Cézanne paintings that one could buy from Tanguy were his early works. In fact, the only later Cézanne that has been traced to Tanguy’s shop is the still life of apples and primroses, which was probably purchased from Tanguy not long after the artist painted it.
Even though Tanguy likely handled few of Cézanne’s paintings and sold less, Tanguy’s death in 1894 explains why Cézanne was so receptive to Vollard’s proposal to show his work; Tanguy had been the artist’s only venue to the outside world. Tanguy’s death came at a time when the other Impressionists were now gaining substantial critical and financial recognition; one can only imagine how much Cézanne felt overlooked.

Before I leave the topic of Tanguy, I want to mention the colorful story related by Vollard in his memoirs, in which Tanguy is said to have cut up the artist’s canvases, with the painter’s permission, to sell bits and pieces of them to clients who could not afford to buy larger works. Like other Vollard stories, this account probably has more to do with the dealer’s need to justify the physical condition of the Cézannes he was selling clients rather than with actual events. There are, indeed, almost fifty such paintings that survive today which were clearly cut down from larger canvases; all of them are still lifes and flower studies, all of them are dated to the late 1870s and early 1880s. However, of these painting fragments, Vollard himself sold at the very least more than half. These pictures he most likely acquired from Cézanne’s Paris studio either just before or after the 1895 exhibition. Therefore, it is likely that Cézanne himself cut up most or all of these paintings, perhaps as a kind of editing process, discarding the passages of the painting that displeased him.

The Tanguy story is important to my topic tonight because these painting fragments as well as the artist’s most incomplete canvases Vollard was most likely to sell cheap; therefore a number of these were bought by artists. It is also a reflection of Cézanne’s achievement that even dismembered his pictures possess remarkable force. Degas certainly believed this, because he bought several of them out of the Vollard show (including this painting of apples now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). But both the fragments and the apparently unfinished canvases contributed to the perception, which arose in the wake of the Vollard show, and about which I will have more to say later, that regarded Cézanne as an unrealized, or effectively damaged artist, a perception held even by at least some of his Impressionist colleagues.
Paul Gauguin, even more than Pissarro and Caillebotte, has to count as the most important of Cézanne’s early artist collectors, because, unlike the others, Cézanne’s work immediately and dramatically influenced Gauguin’s own. Gauguin freely acknowledged this debt to Cézanne’s technique by copying one of the artist’s still lifes into the background of this 1890 portrait.

It was around the time of this portrait that Gauguin is said to have routinely begun painting by remarking, “Come, Let’s paint a Cézanne!” Either under Gauguin’s direct or indirect tutelage a number of young painters came to admire Cézanne’s work. They included such artists in Gauguin’s immediate circle as Emile Bernard and Emile Schuffenecker, as well as various members of the self-styled Nabis group, including Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, and Edouard Vuillard. And because of Gauguin’s debt to Cézanne, and the advice he gave to other artists to study Cézanne’s work, a number of critics during the 1890s claimed Cézanne to be a forerunner of symbolism. In this reading, Cézanne was admired for his personal expressiveness and the decorative patterning created by his brushwork rather than as a painter of reality.

Incidentally, Cézanne later claimed Gauguin stole his “tache”, Cezanne’s habit of applying paint in distinctly visible and regular blocks of color. This complaint has often been noted when describing Cézanne’s paranoia and irascibility; but it is also our only indication that, in bothering to complain at all, Cézanne recognized that Gauguin had become an important artist, even if, in Cézanne’s view, his importance was only achieved by appropriating his technique.

As for Gauguin, while still a businessman taking instruction with Pissarro and painting alongside Cézanne at the beginning of the 1880s, the artist was able to acquire six Cézannes along with a number of other Impressionist paintings. Gauguin, however, treasured his Cézannes over all the other paintings in his collection. After abandoning his collection, along with his wife Mette, in Copenhagen in 1884, the artist managed to reacquire four of his Cézannes; the other two Mette sold to pay the family’s bills;
even these pictures Gauguin tried (albeit unsuccessfully) to buy back. Hard up for money in 1888, Gauguin still refused to sell *Still Life with Fruit Dish* to an artist friend, writing “unless there’s an absolute necessity I would part with it only after my last shirt.” However, this painting, like his other Cézannes, was consumed by his South Seas adventures. In 1897, desperate for money to pay for medical treatment, Gauguin authorized its sale in Paris to the collector Georges Viau for 600 francs. Ten years later, when Viau auctioned his collection, the picture sold for 19,000 francs. To give some idea what that price means, it is equivalent to what stars of the Paris Salon, like a William Bouguereau, received for their paintings in their heyday.

In general, the artists who, like Gauguin, acquired Cézanne’s work during this first period of acquisitions were inevitably buying pictures painted before 1884. This was before Cézanne had painted the overwhelming majority of the canvases upon which his subsequent reputation would rest. Lack of contact and the inability to see what Cézanne had become as a painter explains why the first Vollard show stimulated a second burst of artists collecting Cézanne. It is also why the exhibition even astonished Pissarro and came as a revelation to Degas. Pissarro, Degas, Monet, Renoir and Mary Cassatt, all purchased Cézannes from Vollard either at or in the immediate aftermath of the first show. In promoting Cézanne, by encouraging Vollard to give him a show, by buying his work, and by causing their collector friends to do so as well, the Impressionists, whether they fully realized it or not, actually abetted the separation of Cézanne from the nascent historical canonization of Impressionism.

To put this more simply, Cézanne, to quote Roger Fry, became after 1895 a “Post-Impressionist.” Rather than confirming the on-going vitality of the Impressionists’ practices, Cézanne’s work, especially his later work, inspired a wholesale repudiation of what the Impressionists stood for by the generation of artists who came to maturity after 1900.

From Cézanne’s involvement with Vollard came at least four major developments. The first, and perhaps least understood, fact about Cézanne’s rise to fame through Vollard’s patronage is
that for the first time in history a major artist had his market built primarily through commercial gallery exhibitions, or to be more precise, through a network of collectors, speculators and dealers. It is true that many nineteenth-century artists had used recognition won at such public exhibitions as the Paris Salon as springboards for lucrative sales through commercial galleries. But not until Cézanne that a major artist established his or her reputation and market primarily through the agency of commercial gallery shows. Maurice Denis’ homage to Cézanne, although an elaborate fiction in many ways, reflects the artist’s immersion in the commercial gallery world.

Precisely because Cézanne first became famous via commercial gallery shows, there grew up a widespread conviction among hostile critics writing before the First World War (and even well into the 1920s) that the artist was a creature of dealer conspiracies. The critics assumed that the reputation of an artist whose work displayed radically inconsistent perspectives, lack of regard for anatomical proportions, and a persistent willingness to leave large parts of his canvases unpainted, such a reputation could only have been achieved through speculation. Here is a typical putdown of the artist, this one published in a Paris newspaper in 1905: “What use have we now for Monsieur Cézanne? Do not all who have seen his works consider him an irremediable failure? So much the worse for the dealers [who believed] that some day they would clean up with his works. Let Monsieur Vollard accept the inevitable!...”

As is so often the case in the history of modern art, the critics were wrong and the dealers were right. By 1910 Vollard and other Parisian dealers routinely sold their Cézannes for prices much higher than works by the formerly “great” artists of the Paris Salon. Yet even the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, an ardent admirer of Cézanne, mistakenly concluded, when observing the visitors to the Cézanne posthumous retrospective in 1907, that “even the painters, the young painters, are already passing by more quickly because they see the dealers on [Cézanne’s] side.”
Rilke was no more prescient than the Parisian critics, because another consequence of Cézanne’s late-arriving commercial gallery career was that the “outrages” Cézanne was believed to have perpetrated on art were just then being surpassed by the young artists he directly inspired, which is to say artists like Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. It is interesting to note here that Cézanne’s is the unusual case where collectors were actively competing for the artist’s paintings before they had exerted significant influence on younger painters. This only reinforced the view that Cézanne was a creation of the art market, rather than an artist who deserved to be judged on his own merit. Even in Matisse’s case, although he acquired his first Cézanne from Vollard in 1899—Vollard made the painter pay at least full market value for his picture, and perhaps well more than that—the full effect of Cézanne’s work on Matisse did not become apparent until 1905, that is, almost a decade after the first Vollard show.

Picasso also had the opportunity to see Vollard’s Cézannes as early as 1901, when the dealer gave the young painter a show, but Picasso’s sustained engagement with the artist’s work only came seven years later and only after his acquaintance with Georges Braque, who, along fellow fauvisists Othon Friesz, Raoul Dufy and André Derain, had begun to explore Cézanne’s work in 1906. Picasso felt less need than Matisse to own Cézanne’s work, although he later insisted “Cézanne, he was my one and only master! Don’t you think I looked at his pictures? I spent years studying them.”

In the end, Picasso bought only three Cézannes, and only one of these could he have acquired prior to the First World War. Significantly, however, it is one of the very late works, this view of the Château Noir, painted sometime during the two years before Cézanne’s death, a painting whose complex network of interlocking touches of paint is reminiscent of Picasso’s early cubist works. In any case, the consequence of Cézanne being proclaimed the father of the post-1900 Parisian avant-gardes is that the critics who hated the new painting tarred Cézanne with the same brush they used to attack fauvism, cubism, and the later “isms” of the avant-garde.
If you think about it, Cézanne was the only artist of the Impressionist generation to be important to the young painters who revolutionized art during the first decade of the 20th century. This fact is less surprising if we reflect on the Impressionists’ post-1880 careers. Long before 1900, Renoir and Pissarro had stopped making innovative paintings; after a period of commercially unsuccessful experimentation during the 1880s, both artists had retreated into styles that imitated the work of their youth. The year of the first Cézanne show at Volland’s, for example, Pissarro made a series of paintings of nudes in landscapes and interiors. While the subject matter was a radical departure for the artist (and an experiment not subsequently repeated) his manner of painting harked back to the work of the late 1860s-early 1870s. By the time Renoir and Pissarro had become commercially successful during the 1890s, the critics and younger artists treated them as little more than living historical artifacts. They simply ceased to matter to whatever was new in contemporary art in Paris.

Degas’ late work shows a more innovative bent than either Pissarro or Renoir, but it might be argued that Degas’ late style has as much to do with the artist’s failing eyesight as it does with the development of new ideas. In any case, Degas’ productivity sharply declined during the 1890s and after; more importantly, the artist’s reputation rests solidly on the work he made during the period of the eight Impressionist exhibitions rather for the work made after 1890.

Only Monet among Cézanne’s erstwhile colleagues from the Impressionist years continued to develop his work in significantly new directions after the 1880s. During the early 1890s, Monet exhibited at Paul Durand-Ruel’s gallery his innovative series, showing in succession paintings of grainstacks, of poplars, and of Rouen Cathedral. Besides introducing the idea of exhibiting works of art in a series of closely interrelated images, Monet more sharply located the specific time of day and atmospheric conditions than he had in his paintings prior to 1890.

It was also around this time that Monet came increasingly devoted to painting his garden, and central to these later pictures, the water lilies in his pond. Monet resolved the tension between
the small, complex touches of paint that sit on the surface of his early Impressionist pictures, and the often deep spaces they depicted, by raising the horizon of his pictures as he looked down into the water of his pond. His brushwork correspondingly grew larger and more emphatic and the depicted world dissolved increasingly into fields of color with an extraordinary degree of abstraction. Yet despite the radical evolution of his late practices, even Monet’s work exerted little influence over the development of early 20th century painting. In fact, it was not until the 1950s, as a consequence of the interest aroused by Abstract Expressionism, that his late work acquired the standing it still enjoys today.

By contrast, what the first Vollard show demonstrated to those able to see it, was that Cézanne alone made work later in life immediately and substantially more important, and ultimately more influential than his work from the Impressionist days. Cézanne was 56 years old when he debuted at Vollard’s. His most admired paintings and the ones that today bring the highest prices on the rare occasions they come to auction, Cézanne painted after 1885, when he was already well into his forties.

Most remarkable of all, after the first Vollard show, Cézanne’s art continued to develop; it reached its most radical expression in these late works, such as the large Bather series and the great views of Mont Sainte-Victoire. In such pictures as these, color acquires a function almost wholly separate from the object it was intended to describe. Cézanne’s world becomes a vibrating field, shifting from deep space to the surface of the painting and back again.

Because they are so familiar and so much a part of the subsequent development of 20th-century art, we tend to take these late contributions of Cézanne’s for granted. Yet it is very rare in the history of Western art that an artist has produced his most important work during his last years. Typically, revolutions in art are the creation of the young.

A final consequence of the Vollard exhibition, as well as perhaps its most striking feature, is how it contributed to a fundamental misrecognition of the nature of the artist’s
achievement. The first Vollard show cemented Cézanne’s reputation as a damaged artist, whose works, however beautiful in parts, generally suffered in their entirety. The flawed whole, this view held, was the inevitable consequence of an artist incapable of realizing his ambitions. Cézanne was described as an artist whose achievements were produced as much in spite of his intentions as owing to his craft. In this sense, Cézanne became an artistic primitive.

In the few references to the painter’s work that preceded the Vollard exhibition, and in much of the literature that followed, friendly critics habitually described Cézanne and his paintings by using such words as “instinctive”, “ingenious”, “sincere”, “naive”, and “child-like.” Less friendly critics—but even supporters on occasion—characterized the artist’s work as “incomplete”, “unfinished”, “awkward”, “clumsy”, “brutal”, and even “impotent”. So, for example, Geffroy described Cézanne as a painter who “is frequently incomplete, that he has been unable to conquer the difficulty, that the obstacle to realization is evident to anyone who looks.”

At root, this misrecognition rests in not crediting the artist sufficiently for his intentions and in heeding too strongly Cézanne’s own frequently recorded complaints regarding his struggle to realize his paintings. In an interview in 1902, for example, Cézanne is said to have remarked: “I believe myself to be a painter. What’s more, others recognize it, don’t they, since they buy my impressions. Nevertheless, they are imperfect things. Oh yes, I say it. The problem is that I don’t explore the local colors.” Statements like these underline the complexity of Cézanne’s self-presentation to the world after he began to become famous. While he seems to suggest that he barely believes in his status as an artist, in his remarks about the other modern painters he admires, which was at all times a very short list, that might include Courbet, Pissarro, Renoir, and most of all, Monet, it is clear that Cézanne regarded himself at the very least as their equal, and, I think, in general, their superior. He wrote to a young admirer, for example, in 1902 that “I despise all living painters, except Monet and Renoir, and I want to succeed by work.”

Paul Cézanne, Boy in a Red Vest, 1888-90
Kunsthalle, Zurich
It is because Cézanne had spent a lifetime as an artist with few external validations of his art, that he prized the sales of his pictures so much. It is quite clear from his transactions with Vollard that he cared much less for the money sales would bring, than that in selling his work he found confirmation for his endeavors. It is also why he is reported to have said, when the Caillebotte Cézanne went on display in the Luxembourg, “At last, I shit on Bouguereau.” Finally, in the text I quoted above, in admitting that he doesn’t explore local colors, the artist disingenuously refers to his real enterprise, which was to both capture his sensations and to make a painting out of them. His struggle to reconcile optical observation with pictorial construction is a failure only in a sense that his ambition to find the perfect solution had no final resolution—every painting was but one more step on a spiritual mission that had no clearly defined goal.

It is not surprising that outsiders like Geffroy confused his struggles with a failure of ability. But what is surprising is that so did at least some of his artist friends. Camille Pissarro, fresh from visiting the first Cézanne show at Vollard’s, informed his son Lucien that “At Vollard’s there is a very complete exhibition of Cézanne’s works. Still lifes of astonishing perfection, and some unfinished works, really extraordinary for their fierceness and character.” A week later, he wrote Lucien at length about the exhibition, in a famous letter I would like to quote at some length.

there were exquisite things, still lifes of irreproachable perfection, others much worked on and yet unfinished, of even greater beauty, landscapes, nudes and heads that are unfinished but yet grandiose, and so painted, so supple.... Why? Sensation is there!... Curiously enough, while I was admiring this strange, disconcerting aspect of Cézanne, familiar to me for many years, Renoir arrived. But my enthusiasm was nothing compared to Renoir’s. Degas himself is seduced by the charm of this refined savage, Monet, all of us.... Are we mistaken? I don’t think so. The only ones who are not subject to the charm of Cézanne are precisely those artists or collectors who have shown by their errors that their sensibilities are defective. They properly point out the faults
we all see, which leap to the eye, but the charm—that they do not see.
Clearly all of Cézanne's colleagues from the Impressionist years were surprised by this body of work, none of which any of them had had the opportunity to see during the years when Cézanne became the artist we now so greatly admire. But following the surprise comes the criticism. Pissarro extravagantly praised what he saw in the exhibition but could not help noting the “unfinished” character of many of these paintings as well as the “faults we all see.” Even he described Cézanne, his old friend and pupil, as a “refined savage.”

The way I understand Pissarro’s reaction is two-fold. First, I think Cézanne simply outgrew Pissarro (and perhaps with the exception of Monet, all the other Impressionists). Pissarro’s letter makes it clear that none of Cézanne’s erstwhile friends from the Impressionist years had fully realized the painter Cézanne had become. It may also well have been that Pissarro now found himself jealous of Cézanne’s notoriety. During the nineties Pissarro frequently complained to his son that his contemporary work was being neglected in favor of the work of his youth, and that his whole career was slighted in favor of Monet, Renoir, and Degas. We shouldn’t be surprised that when Pissarro decided to acquire several Cézannes out of the first Vollard show, the dealer agreed to take one of Pissarro’s early landscapes, from 1870, in exchange.

In buying their Cézannes it is striking that Degas, Cassatt, Pissarro and Renoir were all drawn to works from Cézanne’s early maturity rather than his more recent canvases. Degas, Pissarro, and Renoir did not purchase a single painting by Cézanne dated to later than 1885.

Only Monet bought Cézanne’s later work in quantity, and it seems that it is from the contacts between the two artists in the years around 1895 that their mutual admiration grew. Cézanne is quoted as having lashed out at Monet once or twice, but in general, Monet was to Cézanne much as Vollard wrote, in one of the most often quoted passages from Vollard’s reminiscences about Cézanne: According to Vollard: Cézanne rated Claude Monet the highest among contemporary painters. Sometimes, in talking
about Impressionism, he would attack the painter... with this favorite sally: ‘Monet is only an eye.’ And then he would add directly, ‘but good Lord what an eye!’

The esteem was clearly mutual. One visitor to Giverny, probably before the First World War, recalled looking at Monet’s collection of pictures in the company of the artist and the politician and Monet’s great friend, Georges Clemenceau. He noted that in Monet’s bedroom, hanging over the bed, was Chateau Noir flanked by the View of L’Estaque, and below that picture, the Bathers. But according to Monet, his “most beautiful painting” was in the adjoining room. Clemenceau walked into the room and “There was nothing there but a single painting hanging on the wall, and without a frame, The Boy in a Red Vest. I stayed there a long time looking at it. Suddenly, I sensed a presence in the room. It was Clemenceau and Monet, who, after a long glance, said to us in his beautiful grave voice: ‘Yes, Cézanne, he’s the greatest of us all.’

It is both a measure of Cézanne’s importance, and one of the ironies of the commercial process through which he became famous, that Cézanne’s canonization did not belong to the general canonization of the Impressionists. Despite Monet’s comments, Cézanne only became recognized as a truly great artist when the generation of painters working after 1900 was accorded similar stature. Cézanne’s fame (and market) was not bound up with Monet’s and Pissarro’s, but with that of Matisse and Picasso.