

Cézanne: *Portrait of a Peasant*, 1905–6

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Fig. 1
Paul Cézanne
Portrait of a Peasant, 1905–6
Oil on canvas. 64.8 x 54.6 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
R952¹

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 2
The terrace of the studio at Les Lauves today,
photographs by Guillermo Solana, 2014

Portrait of a Peasant [fig. 1] was painted by Cézanne at the end of his life, between 1905 and 1906. The man, positioned in the centre of the composition, sits on a chair by the wall of the garden of the artist's studio at Les Lauves [fig. 2] with crossed legs, his right hand resting on his lap and his left hand leaning on a stick; a white cloth is draped over his arm. He sports a straw hat or *canotier* to shield himself from the sun of Provence and the blue garments commonly worn by peasants of the region. The most striking feature of this portrait is that, although the painting is at an advanced stage of execution, the face is unfinished, making it impossible to recognise the sitter. This article sets out to analyse this intriguing faceless figure.

John Rewald notes that "although Cézanne's activity lasted for nearly fifty years, before settling into the Les Lauves studio he had hardly ever painted plein-air portraits. [...] Beginning in the summer of 1902, when he moved into his new studio, Cézanne made use of the terrace in front of the house, in the shade of a lime tree. Although his favourite model was his elderly gardener Vallier, he also got other acquaintances willing to pose to do so. They were always men, and among them this peasant with a straw hat..."²

The head, especially the face, is lightly sketched, contrasting with the rest of the composition which is more finished. It is not known why Cézanne did not complete it. It is strange in that "in most of the artist's unfinished portraits, the face is essentially complete, the facial features always recognizable, even if large parts of the canvas have been left blank. It is impossible to identify the man shown here, and this would seem to indicate that, in the *réalisation* of this portrait, Cézanne was concerned primarily with the composition and only secondarily with the depiction of a particular person."³

It is evident that the portrait is not intended to capture the likeness of a particular individual but rather to represent the human figure in nature, to the extent that the peasant's blue jacket is easily mistaken for the vegetation of the background garden because the foreground blends in with the background, as in many of his late canvases. The boundaries between the figure and what is behind him begin to be blurred, re-establishing the continuity between man and nature. It is the image of "a man wholly absorbed into his natural environment and entirely at peace with it".⁴

The "palette of rich greens, blues, yellows, browns and whites grants this portrait an extremely harmonious and balanced effect".⁵

Earlier on, in the last decade of the century, Cézanne often had local workers sit for him (as in the series of card players), and sometimes painted them with crossed legs in indoor spaces. For example, he painted a young male peasant full-face and almost full-length in this way [fig. 3]. The modest labourer, his hands resting on his lap, patiently waits for the long sitting to end.



Fig. 3
Seated Peasant,
c. 1892–96
Oil on canvas.
54.6 x 45.1 cm.
Metropolitan Museum
of Art. The Walter
H. and Leonore
Annenberg Collection.
Gift of Walter H. and
Leonore Annenberg,
1997, bequest of
Walter H. Annenberg,
2002, 1997.60.2
R827



Fig. 4
Portrait of a Peasant,
c. 1900
Oil on canvas.
92.7 x 73.7 cm.
National Gallery
of Canada, Ottawa,
acquired in 1950, 5769
R943



Fig. 5
Émile Bernard,
Cézanne sitting in front
of the *Large Bathers*
In his studio at
Les Lauves, 1904.
Photograph, Musée
d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 6
*Self-Portrait with
a Beret*, 1898–1900
Oil on canvas.
64.1 x 53.3 cm
Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston. Charles
H. Bayley Picture
and Painting Fund
and partial gift of
Elizabeth Paine
Metcalf
R834

“By the late 1890s, Cézanne had grown increasingly fond of a group of Provençal regionalists known as the *Félibrige*. Among these, Joachim Gasquet maintained the closest relationship with the aging painter, becoming the now venerable master’s friend, biographer, and critical champion. Like the *Félibrige*, Cézanne came to believe in the uniqueness and fortitude, both moral and physical, of the rooted traditions of the south. In particular, the artist came to revere the dignity and strength of the Provençal peasants, for despite the pressures of modernity, they had succeeded in maintaining the traditions and mannerisms distinctive to the region. In their flesh and blood, Cézanne saw the land of his beloved Provence.”⁶ By having them sit for him [fig. 4] in a pose previously reserved for key people such as his father Victor Chocquet and Ambroise Vollard, he sought to present them with utmost dignity and authority; he painted them with pride.

Cézanne himself adopted the same pose in 1904 [fig. 5], when Émile Bernard photographed him sitting in front of his *Large Bathers* in the studio at Les Lauves.

The painter clearly identifies with his peasants, even though they come from different social strata. It is therefore not surprising to find Cézanne described in terms similar to those used to refer to his Provençal peasants: “In Provence, as in the Orient, the sense of caste isn’t very strong, nor are the castes so well entrenched. Cézanne resembled a *petit bourgeois* and an artisan, with a decency, a dignity, a simple pride whose parallel would be hard to find in the same classes elsewhere. Peasant *finesse* and exaggeratedly polite manners were combined in him.”⁷

During this period, in which he isolated himself in his native city and suffered physical decline, Cézanne focused his attention on portraying ageing. He not only reflected on the passage of time and old age in his last known self-portrait, *Self-Portrait with a Beret* [fig. 6], but also paid tribute to his beloved Provence by posing in the typical regional headwear.

Around this time he also expressed his concerns by painting the inhabitants of Aix, especially those to whom he was most directly related: “I live in my home town, and I rediscover the past in the faces of people my age. Most of all, I like the expressions of people who have grown old without drastically changing their habits, who just go along with the laws of time.”⁸ *Portrait of a Peasant* is a good example of this.

The elderly gardener Vallier

The work in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is closely related to the watercolour *Man Wearing a Straw Hat* in the Art Institute of Chicago [fig. 7]. It is likely that they were painted around the same time, though



Fig. 7
Man Wearing a Straw Hat, 1905–6
Watercolour over graphite on paper
The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Janis H. Palmer in memory of Pauline K. Palmer, 1983.1498 R638



Fig. 8
The Gardener Vallier, c. 1906
Oil on canvas.
65.4 x 54.9 cm.
Tate, London.
Bequeathed by C. Frank Stoop, 1933, N04724 R950



Fig. 9
Paul Cézanne
The Gardener Vallier, 1906
Oil on canvas.
65 x 54 cm
Private collection R954

there are a few slight differences, chiefly in the tree and the balustrade, and a more obvious one especially in the model's face, which is more detailed in the watercolour.⁹

But there is no doubt that *Portrait of a Peasant* is directly linked to the Tate's canvas entitled *The Gardener Vallier* [fig. 8]. The elderly Vallier was very close to the artist, for whom he worked as a sort of odd-job man. He even nursed Cézanne, as he was one of the few people the artist allowed to touch him. This is borne out by a letter the painter wrote to his son Paul on 25 July 1906:

"My dear Paul:

[...] Vallier massages me, my ribs are a little better, Madame Brémont says that my foot is better – I follow Boissy's treatment, it is horrible. It is very hot. From eight o'clock on the weather is unbearable...¹⁰"

Cézanne asked Vallier to sit for him during the last two years of his life – he went on to paint six oil portraits and three watercolours of the old man – and a relationship of trust and affection developed between them.¹¹

Cézanne continued to work on the portrait of *The Gardener Vallier* [fig. 9] until the end of his days (though according to Vollard, his dealer, the last portrait he painted was the one in the Thyssen collection). While he was painting outdoors on 15 October a storm took him by surprise and he fainted. He was carried home and got up early the next day to work on a portrait of Vallier beneath the lime tree in his studio garden. He passed away days later. The painter's sister Marie Cézanne describes this in a letter written to her nephew Paul on Saturday 20 October 1906.¹²

Cézanne thus fulfilled his wish to die while painting. In a letter of 21 September 1906 he wrote to Émile Bernard: "I am always studying after nature and it seems to me that I make slow progress. I should have liked you near me, for solitude always weighs me down a bit. But I am old, ill, and I have sworn to myself to die painting, rather than go under in the debasing paralysis which threatens old men who allow themselves to be dominated by passions which coarsen their senses [...]."¹³

Cézanne attached huge value to the series of portraits of Vallier, in which the Thyssen *Portrait of a Peasant* could be included – not only because of all the time and effort he put into them but because the *Portrait of a Peasant* is a sort of self-portrait. "It does indeed appear that the portrait of Vallier is, metaphorically speaking, a self-portrait, emblematic of the painter's mental and physical identification with his sitter."¹⁴

Gasquet himself believed there was a parallel between the two elderly men:



Fig.10
Nicolas Froment
Central panel of the *Triptych of the Burning Bush*, 1475–76
Oil on panel
Cathedral of Saint-Saveur,
Aix-en-Provence

“He had the old man pose. Often the poor fellow was ill and did not come. Then Cézanne himself posed. He dressed up in dirty old rags in front of a mirror. And then by means of a strange transference, a mystical and perhaps intentional substitution, the features of the old beggar and those of the artist were intermingled on the dark canvas, both their lives [about to] issue into the same void and the same immortality.”¹⁵

It is interesting to end by also pointing out that Lawrence Gowing considered that in this last portrait of Vallier executed in 1906 [fig. 9] “the gardener in profile has not only the look of Cézanne but the look of a Michelangelesque Moses – another of Cézanne’s self-projections”.¹⁶ Some time earlier, Émile Bernard had drawn the same parallel owing to the physical similarities between the Moses in Nicolas Froment’s *Triptych of the Burning Bush* [fig. 10] and the painter: “In the past I had seen Cézanne in that same place, beneath the large picture of the *Burning Bush*, whose Moses bore such an uncanny resemblance to him. No doubt his soul still returned there.”¹⁷

During this final period Cézanne himself had identified with Moses more than once, especially in relation to his work: “I am working doggedly, for I see the promised land before me. Shall I be like the great Hebrew leader or shall I be able to enter?”¹⁸ Underlying this and other statements is his constant worry that he might die without finishing his task. Indeed, it is more than likely that the artist sensed that the end was near while he was working on the portraits of Vallier...

The last visitors to his studio – Charles Camoin, Francis Jourdain, Émile Bernard, R. P. Rivière and Jacques Félix Schnerb – recall seeing pictures of the gardener and the bathers there. “Cézanne was also painting the portrait of a man, in profile, wearing a cap. He told us, moreover, that he had always carried on parallel studies, work from nature and work from the imagination. He appeared to attach great importance to this portrait, saying, ‘If I succeed with this good fellow, it means that my theory will have proved true.’”¹⁹

Notes

- 1 The photograph captions of works by Paul Cézanne include a number preceded by the letter R, which in the case of the oil paintings refers to their number in John Rewald’s catalogue raisonné: *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne, A Catalogue Raisonné*. Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1996. For the watercolours see John Rewald: *Paul Cézanne. The Watercolours. A Catalogue Raisonné* by John Rewald. Thames and Hudson, London, 1983.
- 2 John Rewald in Hélène Adhémar, Maurice Sérullaz (ed.): *Cézanne les dernières années 1895-1906*. [Exh. cat. Paris, Grand Palais, 20 April–23 July 1978]. Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1978, p. 82. “Quoique l’activité de Cézanne se fût étendue sur presque cinquante années, il n’avait pratiquement jamais peint de portraits en plein air avant de s’installer dans l’atelier des Lauves. Les exceptions son étonnamment rares: ...” “Dès son installation aux Lauves, en été 1902, Cézanne se mit à profiter de la terrasse qui s’ouvre devant l’atelier, ombragée par un tilleul. Bien que son modèle favori fût son vieux jardinier Vallier, il faisait

Notes

- aussi poser d'autres personnes de sa connaissance qui s'y prêtait. C'étaient toujours des hommes, et parmi eux, ce paysan coiffé d'un canotier..."
- 3 See Christina Feilchenfeldt's article in Felix Baumann, Evelyn Benesch, Walter Feilchenfeldt, Klaus Albrecht Schröder (eds.): *Cézanne Finish Unfinish*. [Exh. cat. Vienna Kunstforum 20 January–25 April, 2000; Zurich, Kunsthaus 5 May–30 July 2000]. Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2000, p. 199. "The portrait appears less as the representation of a particular individual than as a realization of a specific pictorial subject, that of the human figure in natural surroundings. The cursorily indicated face contrasts with the fairly detailed execution of the rest of the composition. It is likely that Cézanne never found an opportunity to complete the face in this portrait."
 - 4 Theodore Reff: "Painting and Theory in the Final Decade". In William Rubin (ed.): *Cézanne: The Late Work*. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1977, pp. 22–23.
 - 5 In Baumann, Benesch, Feilchenfeldt, Schröder 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
 - 6 Steven Platzman: *Cézanne The Self-Portraits*. London, Thames & Hudson, 2001, p. 166.
 - 7 Edmond Jaloux: "Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne", *L'Amour de l'Art*, Paris, May 1920, p. 285.
 - 8 P. M. Doran (ed.): *Conversations avec Cézanne*. Paris, Macula, 1978, p. 21: "[...] je vis dans la ville de mon enfance, et c'est dans le regard des gens de mon âge que je revois le passé. J'aime sur toutes choses l'aspect des gens qui ont vieilli sans faire violence aux usages, en se laissant aller aux lois du temps". English version: Michael Doran (ed.): *Conversations with Cézanne*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, p. 23.
 - 9 For more information see Guillermo Solana: *Cézanne site/non-site*. [Exh. cat. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 4 February–18 May 2014], pp. 33–34.
 - 10 Paul Cézanne: *Paul Cézanne, Letters*. [John Rewald (ed.)]. New York, Da Capo Press Inc., 1995, p. 319.
 - 11 Philip Conisbee and Denis Coutagne (ed.): *Cézanne in Provence*. [Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art, 29 January–7 May 2006; Aix-en-Provence, Musée Granet, 9 June–17 September 2006]. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 242. "There was trust and affection between these two elderly men, to the extent that Vallier was the only person attested to have been permitted to touch Cézanne (who reportedly could not tolerate physical contact)."
 - 12 Paul Cézanne: *Paul Cézanne, Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 337. "[...] He remained outside in the rain for several hours, he was brought back in a laundry cart; and two men had to carry him up to his bed. The next day, early in the morning, he went into the garden [of his studio at Les Lauves] to work under the lime-tree, on a portrait of Vallier, he came back dying [...]."
 - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 330.
 - 14 Steven Platzman: *Cézanne The Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
 - 15 Joachim Gasquet: *Cézanne*. Fougères, Encre Marine, 2002, p. 205. "Il faisait poser le vieillard. Souvent le pauvre malade, ne venait pas. Alors Cézanne posait lui-même. Il revêtait devant le miroir les sales guenilles. Et un étrange échange ainsi, une substitution mystique, et peut-être voulue, mêla, sur la toile profonde, les traits du vieux mendiant à ceux du vieil artiste, leurs deux vies au confluent du même néant et de la même mortalité ». English translation cited from Steven Platzman, *Cézanne: the Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.* p. 190.
 - 16 Lawrence Gowing: "The Logic of Organized Sensations". In Rubin 1977, *op. cit.*, p.70.
 - 17 "J'avais vu Cézanne autrefois à cette place, sous le grand tableau du Buisson Ardent, dont le Moïse lui ressemble si étrangement. Sans doute son âme y revenait encore." Émile Bernard: *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne*. Fontfroide, Bibliothèque artistique & littéraire, 2013, p. 82.
 - 18 "Je travaille opiniâtement, j'entrevois la Terre Promise, Serais-je comme le grand chef des Hébreux ou bien pourrais-je y pénétrer?". Letter to Ambroise Vollard, Aix, 9 January 1903. Paul Cézanne: *Cinquante-trois lettres* [transcribed and annotated by Jean-Claude Lebensztejn]. Paris, *L'Échope*, 2011, p. 58. English translation cited from *Paul Cézanne, Letters*, p. 293.
 - 19 Rivière and Schnerb, visit of 1905, in Doran 2001, *op. cit.* p. 90.