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## ART REVIEW

# ‘Cézanne Drawing’ Review: Radical With a Pencil

An exhibition at MoMA argues that the foundational painter of modern art produced his most groundbreaking work on paper.



Cézanne's ‘The Abduction’ (1867)

PHOTO: THE MORGAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM/GRAHAM S. HABER

*By Mary Tompkins Lewis*

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*New York*

Visitors to “Cézanne Drawing” at the Museum of Modern Art may be astonished to learn that critics once complained that the late 19th-century French artist could not draw. With about 280 graphite, ink and gouache drawings and watercolors—over a third of them from private collectors—and a handful of related oil paintings, the staggeringly

beautiful show proves otherwise. Organized by Jodi Hauptman, senior curator at MoMA, and associate curator Samantha Friedman, it also argues convincingly that Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), a foundational painter of modern art, produced his most radical work on paper.

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### Cézanne Drawing

*Museum of Modern Art  
Through Sept. 25*

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The exhibition, arranged in broad, thematic terms, opens with loose study sheets and pages from the artist's sketchbooks. Cézanne drew almost daily over the course of

his career, using standard studio materials, and produced more than 2,000 extant works on paper. Though they rarely served as straightforward preparations for his oil paintings, his drawings pull us directly into his potent creative orbit.

We glimpse Cézanne's innovative techniques in his early "Studies of a Rower" (1867-69), where repeated sketches of a single athletic oarsman fill the page. Darkened, blunted and smudged graphite marks combine line and shading in vigorous repeated strokes, and exposed patches of softly shaded gray turn blank paper into highlights. Rather than simply delineating the figure's contours, such drawings taught the artist how to think about form, movement, modeling and painting itself.



Cézanne's 'Coat on a Chair' (1890-92)

PHOTO: MOMA, N.Y.

Cézanne's powers of pictorial invention were likewise broached in drawings, as seen in his tiny (2 3/4 by 5 inch), ruthless and furiously painted sketch "The Abduction" (1867). In it, a nude male carries off a nude female and slashes of ink, dark pools of watercolor and opaque touches of gouache resonate with the violence of the scene. At times, it is not the kinship of subject and style, but the cohabitation of disparate images on a page that lends them a strangely unsettling air. In his "Study for The Eternal Feminine" (1870-75), for example—a theatrical picture-within-a-picture

scene—the artist appears to be thinking aloud: Vehement diagonals

articulate its compositional thrusts; patches of shadow and light rehearse the role of color; figures tumbling through space or crouched in corners encapsulate the scene's chaotic maelstrom; and a viewer (an artist?) peers around the corner to watch it all take shape. Far more than the preparatory study its title promises, it offers a window into some of Cézanne's wildest narrative paintings, and establishes drawing as a quintessential medium for probing the depths of his fearless imagination.

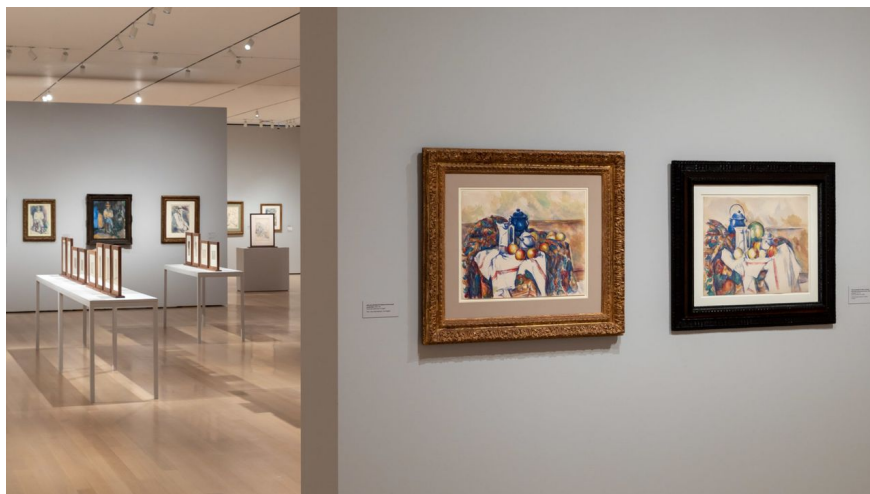
Cézanne's drawings could also reflect his absorption of earlier art, and especially how single sculptures became imprinted in his expanding pictorial vocabulary. His sketches after Pierre Puget's massive statue in the Louvre of "Hercules Resting" are animated by his focus on the marble figure's rippling musculature and dynamic, sculpted shadows—a rhythmic, vitalizing effect that would shape his late bathers and landscape compositions. Hanging nearby are studies after an 18th-century plaster Cupid that Cézanne owned and would incorporate into his paintings. Captured from every angle with soft pencil strokes on delicate fields of color, the statuette seems to pirouette before us on the wall. Rather than copies, such sketches were creative reimaginings of art he knew well, animated by graphite markings that made forms tremble and twist, and by shimmering veils of color and areas of blank paper that mirrored the fleeting effects of light and shadow.

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A central room in the show is anchored by "The Bather" (c. 1885), MoMA's monumental painting of a standing male nude, surrounded by studies of similar figures and a related studio photograph of a male model. As seen in sketches of standing nudes throughout the show, including drawings after Renaissance masters and countless imagined male bathers, Cézanne brought to the painting a wealth of visual memories that would shape his studies from life and the fullness of what his art could encompass.



Paul Cézanne 'Mont Sainte-Victoire,' (1902-06) PHOTO: MOMA, NY



Installation view of 'Cézanne Drawing' PHOTO: MOMA, N.Y./ JONATHAN MUZIKAR



Paul Cézanne 'Rocks Near the Chateau'



Paul Cézanne 'Mercury after Pigalle,' (c. 1890) PHOTO: MOMA, NY





Installation view of 'Cézanne Drawing' PHOTO: MOMA, N.Y./ JONATHAN MUZIKAR



Paul Cézanne 'Still Life with Cut Watermelon,' (c. 1900) PHOTO: MOMA, NY

After the heroic sweep of the preceding galleries, a small series of domestic images offers a respite: the spare graphic eloquence of scissors on an empty sheet, a wonderfully lifelike study of an overcoat slouching in a chair, a decorative rococo clock drawn with such ecstatic abandon that it seems ready to leap off the page.

As evident in the magnificent closing galleries, by the 1890s Cézanne had become an acknowledged master of still life and watercolor paintings, the fragile works of extraordinary brilliance and immediacy that were the culmination of a lifetime of questioning the limits and physical properties of his works on paper. His vibrant "Still Life With Apples, Pears and a Pot" (1900-04), for example, in which discrete touches of color and rapid, repeated outlines highlight the composition's swelling curves and give it a strikingly sensual aura, manifests the ways in which Cézanne's inventive approach to the unforgiving medium facilitated his indefatigable pictorial imagination.

His radical new approach allowed each patch of translucent liquid pigment to dry on the page before adding another layer of color on top.

As seen in views of frieze-like stone formations at Bibémus quarry and the Château Noir near his native Aix-en-Provence, or on a breathtaking wall of images of his signature Provençal motif, Mont Sainte-Victoire, Cézanne's late watercolors became pictorial expressions of his perception and sensory experience of nature. In MoMA's "Mont Sainte-Victoire" (1902-06) Cézanne laid in pulsating patches of blue, violet, green and ocher atop a lean pencil drawing he had retraced in color, and used blank areas of paper to generate the landscape's light, thus capturing, as he had described in letters, his vivid "sensations" and "the magnificent richness of coloring" that were crucial to rendering his motifs.

After a dark year of building walls between ourselves and the world, "Cézanne Drawing" invites us to discover at an exhilaratingly intimate range the luminous genius of an artist whose work remains as rewarding as it is demanding.

—Ms. Lewis writes about art for the *Journal* and other publications and is the author of "Cézanne" (Phaidon).

*Appeared in the June 21, 2021, print edition as "Cézanne Drawing": Radical With A Pencil.'*

## UPCOMING EVENTS

June  
**24**  
2021

11:00 AM - 5:00 PM EDT  
Global Food Forum

June  
**30**  
2021

1:00 PM - 1:45 PM EDT  
WSJ Pro Cybersecurity Webinar: Aligning IT and Cybersecurity

June  
**30**  
2021

7:00 PM - 7:45 PM EDT  
WSJ+ Live: Daniel Kahneman and His Co-Authors on the Crisis of 'Noise'

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