

Cézanne and the Modern French Print



Les baigneurs, petite planche (*The Bathers, small plate*), 1896/97, lithograph in colour on chine volant paper, 23 x 28 cm. On loan to the Barber Institute from a private collection.



Groupe de baigneurs (Group of Bathers), 1892-1894, oil on canvas,
30.5 x 40.8cm. The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia.

This composition relates very closely to that of the lithograph on loan to
the Barber Institute.



Les Grandes baigneuses (The Large Bathers), 1895-1906, oil on canvas, 132.4 x 219.1 cm, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia.

One of the three canvases marking the culmination of the artist's career-long fascination with painting bathers in a landscape.

Transcript

Hello, and welcome back to the online Tuesday Talks given by staff at the Barber Institute, the art gallery and concert hall on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. I'm Helen Cobby, Assistant Curator, and today I will be talking to you about the artist Paul Cézanne, focusing on his superb lithograph depicting a group of bathers, which is on loan to the gallery from a private collection. This work featured in one of the Barber's Print Bay Displays, which opened in February 2020 and considered some of the developments in the creation of the modern French print.

Cézanne, one of the most influential artists in the history of modern European painting, was born in 1839 in Aix-en-Provence in southern France, where he remained for most of his life. His father, a wealthy banker, had persuaded him to train as a lawyer. However, he quickly abandoned law and moved to Paris - the centre of the art world at the time - to attend a private art school, the Académie Suisse, where he became acquainted with the Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro. Pissarro became a pivotal, lifelong influence, helping the younger artist lighten his colour palette, use freer brushwork, experiment with *plein-air* (outdoor) painting, and focus on nature over the darker imaginary subject matter, such as rape and murder, that he was initially drawn towards. So partly thanks to Pissarro, still life and landscape scenes of his beloved Provence became the most typical of his subjects.

He absorbed many other influences in his early years, including those of Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet. He often imitated Courbet, applying thick slabs of dark paint to a canvas with a palette knife. He later told Renoir that it took him twenty years to realise that painting was not sculpture. Later, in the 1880s, his brushwork became increasingly systematic and ordered, as he focused on building form with colour - believing them to be inseparable - with graded tonal variations. He also fractured and flattened space, alluding to multiple perspectives simultaneously, being interested in the physical sensations of the world, the sensations of colour, and how we perceive them.

Cézanne's working methods grew out of his ambition to produce paintings that captured solid forms, rather than the fugitive effects rendered by the Impressionists. He once declared, 'I wanted to make of Impressionism something solid and enduring, like the art in museums.' For this reason, he is usually considered a Post-Impressionist painter, although the term was coined in 1910, four years after his death. However, like the Impressionist painters, he considered the study of nature essential to painting, and he did participate in the First and Third Impressionist Exhibitions, in 1874 and 1877 respectively. Unfortunately, Cézanne's contributions to these exhibitions were met with such bad reviews that he stopped exhibiting for thirteen years.

It wasn't until relatively late in his career, when he was 56 years old, that Cézanne's radical contribution to European art was to an extent acknowledged. This was achieved by the relatively unusual means of a private solo exhibition, making him the first important French artist to forge a reputation through commercial display. The 29 year-old dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard is to thank for this. Despite both his funds and experience of the arts being in short supply, he opened a gallery in Paris in 1894 and a year later organised an exhibition of 150 paintings by Cézanne. This was a risk worth taking, as it confirmed Vollard as a major presence in the Parisian art world, and allowed him to launch or develop the careers of other major artists, such as Gauguin and Picasso.

Vollard also set up a project whereby he invited artists who were not primarily printmakers to contribute to publications showcasing modern experimentations with a range of printmaking techniques. This tapped into the wide-spread enthusiasm for contemporary prints in Paris at the turn of the 19th century. The explosion of printmaking was partly due to a younger generation of artists breaking with the traditional boundaries between the 'high' art of painting and the 'low' graphic arts.

Despite this widespread obsession with printmaking, Cézanne could only be persuaded to make nine different prints during the whole of his career. I would like to focus on his colour lithograph entitled 'Les baigneurs, petite planche' ('The Bathers, small plate'), a version of which is currently on loan to the Barber from a private collection. This lithograph is one of

two prints depicting bathers in a landscape, both executed in 1896/97 during the artist's late period. It measures 23 x 28cm, roughly the size and orientation of a landscape piece of A4 paper. The work was commissioned and published by Vollard in his second album of contemporary prints, just 100 were produced in an attempt to market the publication as an exclusive collector's item.

Cézanne made the print in Paris with the master printmaker Auguste Clot, a collaboration common at the time. He painted in watercolour over a black-and-white proof of the composition and then entrusted Clot to help him recreate the same colour effects in print. Lithography is a type of planographic printing, where an image is printed from a flat surface. It is drawn onto a limestone slab in a greasy medium, then the whole surface is dampened with water, which is repelled by the greasy marks. This allows the printing ink to adhere only to the original marks, before being transferred to paper with a printing press. A separate lithographic stone is used to apply each colour, requiring great skill and foresight.

Lithography has watery and painterly qualities, making it highly suitable for Cézanne's subject matter. He certainly maximises these effects here. Overlapping, shifting patches of colour suggest movement and transience in nature. The broken lines delineating the figures enhance this by letting the bathers merge into their surroundings. This is typical of his bathing compositions, which became increasingly fluid and less structured. At the same time, the cropped trees, at either edge of the composition, frame and anchor the figures, situating them within an arguably Arcadian landscape. They also offer an indication of scale and perspective, and are typical of the trees that Cézanne repeatedly painted in Provence. In this way, the work oscillates between the abstract and the representational - which would become a trait of modernism.

Cézanne's print also embodies other elements of abstraction. For instance, areas of the bare paper are left exposed, including parts of the sky, the bathers' bodies and patches between clumps of foliage. This is typical of his output as a whole; Cézanne increasingly broke with the long-established tradition of creating highly finished paintings. Some critics considered his work to be abandoned or unfinished, yet he explained his

approach in a letter to another artist in 1905, writing 'The sensations of colour that light gives create abstractions that don't let me cover my canvas or follow the outlines of objects when the points of contact are tenuous, delicate; thus my image or picture is incomplete'.

The image of bathers in a landscape has a long tradition in the European history of art, going back to mythological Renaissance paintings, in which you might expect to see nymphs and goddesses reclining besides streams, such as the goddess Diana and her female entourage. This was in part an excuse to paint beautiful nude women. Cézanne's work acts as a modern intervention into this tradition; his figures and landscapes are not specifically identifiable. In the lithograph, the bathers don't give much away, we can't see individual facial features or expressions and they don't appear to be interacting with each other. Furthermore, his scenes are distorted by his use of colour and shapes, there are no narratives or clear literary sources, and the bathers might be male or female, either way they are not eroticised. Finally, he often excludes water from his compositions. In the lithograph, most of the figures look out towards what we can assume is a lake, although we can't actually see it.

Cézanne had a career-long fascination with bathing figures in a landscape, making over 200 such works. He often combined ideas from previous paintings to make new ones. Several oil paintings relate compositionally to the lithograph, including a later 'Bathers' from about 1900, now in the collection of Ernst Beyeler in Basel, and an earlier work by the same title, dating to 1890-94, in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Art in Moscow. They are both relatively small, around the size of a microwave at home. Yet his bathers could reach gigantic sizes of over 2m in length, roughly the size of a small sofa. The culmination of his bathers was a sofa-sized series of oil paintings, rather unimaginatively titled 'Large Bathers', now found at the National Gallery in London, the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They were made between 1895 and 1906, around the same time as the lithograph, suggesting this print is an extension of, or experiment for, these significant works.

Cézanne's scenes of bathers were considered 'ugly' by some critics. This term was often used to describe progressive works of art of the time, fuelled by the anti-modern writer Camille Mauclair's essay, 'The Crisis of Ugliness in Painting', from 1906. Even after his death, Cézanne's images divided opinion for decades to come. For example, in 1937 a scandal erupted when the Philadelphia Museum of Art paid 110,000 dollars for their oil painting 'The Large Bathers'. Yet, the painting is now considered one of the founding works of modern art. In this vein, the Museum of Modern Art in New York often begins curatorial narratives with their own painting of bathers by Cézanne. Today, it is widely acknowledged that his bathers have influenced representations of the nude in a landscape more than any other works since the High Renaissance. Without Cézanne's bathers, works by Matisse, Picasso and many others, including Lucian Freud, would have been inconceivable.

Thank you very much for listening. I hope you will be able to join us again next week for another Tuesday Talk.

Speaker info

Helen Cobby joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on a variety of projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director, and assisted with the curation of the most recent exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets. Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography (the subject of her MA dissertation at the University of London), JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and 20th-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was recently awarded a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City.

Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as a research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of Turner's early architectural work.

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

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