

BBC - Travel - How Provence changed the world of art

On the edge of the quintessential Provençal town of Aix-en-Provence, Mont Ste-Victoire soars more than 1,000m above a vast plain of vineyards, red tile-roofed villages, meandering streams and copses of pines.

As I rambled about Aix and its environs, I never tired of its jagged peak lurking – a constant presence as I sipped espressos in village cafes, roamed herb-scented walking trails and admired its changing palette from staggering viewpoints. One time, I simply watched it glow, framed in my hotel-room window at the former 18th-Century country house Le Pignonnet.

Some might think the peak's significance lies in an ancient battle fought at its base. Indeed, the Romans achieved their first significant stronghold beyond their empire at this very spot, defeating Cimbrian and Teutonic barbarians in 102 BC. Legend dictates the name Mont Ste-Victoire (Mount Saint Victory in English) has memorialised that win ever since (the 'saint' was added by medieval Christians).

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But this rocky limestone peak has contributed much more to the planet, thanks to the revolutionary artistic genius of Aix native Paul Cézanne.

Cézanne, who was born in 1839, always loved the mountain. "As a child, he and his friends Émile Zola and Jean-Baptistin Baille kept an eye on it from afar during their escapades, running, climbing and hunting around the unspoiled countryside at its base," said great-grandson and retired modern-art expert Philippe Cézanne.

The artist went on to spend time in Paris, where he hung out with fellow painters, including Camille Pissarro, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Pissarro pushed him to brighten his palette and paint more like the Impressionists, but the closest he ever got was House of the Hanged Man, Auvers-sur-Oise (1873), showing pale colours and broken brushstrokes. Even so, in that painting, you can also see how he was boldly changing the standing artistic rules, including his merging of foreground and deep space and his deliberate inaccuracies of perspective (a path leads to the left; a bank tilts off to the right at a seemingly awkward angle).

He was boldly changing the standing artistic rules

Cézanne's works weren't totally accepted by the critics, and, a country boy at heart, he realised he didn't belong in Paris; he belonged home, in Provence. And though at times he also resided in L'Estaque near Marseille, Switzerland and Paris, Aix remained his heart and soul, where he became more and more entranced by his beloved Ste-Victoire as a motif.

"At first Cézanne painted Mont Ste-Victoire from afar, from the park of the Jas de Bouffan, the family home [in Aix]," Philippe said. It wasn't until later in his life, in fact, that Cézanne began focusing more intentionally on the mountain, approaching it from different angles, painting it with more precise brushstrokes and patches of colour.

But why was he so transfixed?

"The painter was passionate about the geology and architecture of this natural beacon," Philippe explained. "He had seen the mountain change through the hours, the seasons, so that with time he knew it by heart."

I would rather smash my canvas than invent or imagine a detail

Cézanne became determined to depict its solidity and permanence, breaking it down to the simplest forms in an almost architectural way. This he did with other motifs as well, of course, including still-lives and his monumental series of Bathers. But none exemplify it more than his cherished mountain. In total, beginning in 1870, Cézanne painted the mountain 87 times, and the more he painted it, the more it became flatter, more fragmented and less realistic, as he distilled the forms to geometric shapes of colour. "I would rather smash my canvas than invent or imagine a detail," he once told friend, author and art critic Joaquin Gasquet. "I want to know."

His favourite painting spots were along the mountain's southern flank, centring on the villages of Le Tholonet and Gardanne. Here, the rocky mountain rises above a countryside filled with the deep greens, browns and oranges of pinewoods and valleys. On Frères hill in Gardanne, overlooking the mountain, reproductions of his paintings created on this very spot have been erected, and it was here that I most felt the artist's genius. He didn't just paint the mountain, but he tackled the village too – and I stood there amazed, comparing the pyramid-shaped hill town before me with his series of stacked boxes that anticipated Cubism.

At nearby Bibémus quarry, Cézanne rented a hut and focused on the hand-hewn boulders, where he obsessively painted their blocky shapes and earthy colours, often with the mountain rising beyond. And his final paintings – no doubt the most famous – were rendered from a perch along the Chemin de la Marguerite on the Lauves hill, a short walk from his Aix studio.

I have sworn to die painting

When I visited (a highly recommended experience; his vases and pitchers and plaster cupids remain as if he's just stepped out for a moment), I followed in Cézanne's footsteps up the hill to his favoured painting spot. I was disappointed to find new development in the area, but my breath caught as, between the trees, I spied the peak rising in the distance in all its Cézannesque glory. Standing there, I thought about the last time Cézanne came this way, when, at the age of 67 he was caught in a thunderstorm but continued to paint. "I

have sworn to die painting,” he had declared to his young friend Émile Bernard just a month earlier. Within the week he was dead from pneumonia.

But the most captivating place around the mountain is no doubt its back side, in the town of Vauvenargues where a fortified castle built between the 13th and 17th Centuries burrows into the valley. Even more intriguing is its one-time owner, Pablo Picasso, who greatly admired Cézanne. So much, in fact, it’s said he bought the castle in 1958 with its framed views of St-Victoire, to own ‘la vraie’ (the ‘real’ mountain).

“Picasso in 1900 was a young crazy dog,” said Denis Coutagne, a member of the Société Paul Cézanne and former director of the Musée Granet d’Aix-en-Provence, “devouring the painters who were reaching for artistic renewal, including Toulouse-Lautrec, Derain, Matisse and Rouault. And then he fell upon Cézanne, and for the first time, Picasso was confronted with a very great Master.”

“[Picasso] told me one day Cézanne was his God,” Philippe added.

And so Picasso – and others, including Matisse, Braque and Metzinger – scrutinised Cézanne’s depictions of Mont Ste-Victoire and his other motifs, plunging head on into Cubism and, in essence, 20th-Century modern art.

Whether it’s composition, space, colour or perspective - Cézanne did better

“Painters of the 20th-Century honed in on the breach opened by Cézanne,” Coutagne said. “But each school [Cubism, Fauvism] only took into account one element, whether it’s composition, space, colour or perspective. Cézanne did better. He tackled everything together. He remains at the forefront.”

Which is why Picasso’s famous words echo through the ages: ‘Cézanne was the father of us all!’ And his treasured mountain towers above it all.

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