

# Cézanne and the past

by JOHN-PAUL STONARD

CÉZANNE'S DEBT to the art of older masters has been acknowledged by critics and writers since the earliest years of his fame. At first this was largely anecdotal, based on the artist's own sayings and correspondence, but since the publication of Gertrude Berthold's pioneering *Cézanne und die Alten Meistern* (1958), listing all Cézanne's drawings and paintings made directly from older works, accounts have become more critical and based on documentary evidence.<sup>1</sup> It is a large theme and raises questions that go to the very heart of Cézanne's way of working as part of a French or, more specifically, a Provençal tradition. Surprisingly, *Cézanne and the Past. Tradition and Creativity* held at the **Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest** (closed 17th February), was the first exhibition to tackle the subject as a whole.<sup>2</sup> It did this with elegance and intelligence and, thanks to the curator, Judit Geskó, brought together a series of remarkable loans of Cézanne's own works and those he studied and admired.

Copying was a habit Cézanne quickly took up during his student years at the Ecole de Dessin Gratuite in Aix-en-Provence, conveniently attached to the Musée d'Aix, and where much of the tuition was based on copying after antique sculptures, drawings, engravings and lithographs, as well as from paintings in the Museum. His earliest surviving copies are unremarkable, even bad works such as his direct transcription (1860; cat. no.13) of a lifeless academic painting by Félix Nicolas Frillié, *The kiss of the muse* (1857; no.12). Displayed alongside the originals, these student works nevertheless show how copying was from the outset part of Cézanne's workmanlike approach to painting, the meticulous preparation for each pose and brushstroke. 'One is born a poet, one becomes a craftsman', Emile Zola advised him while still studying in Aix.<sup>3</sup>

As Cézanne's taste evolved, so did the sophistication of his vision of the past. The heavy, brooding quality of early paintings shows a debt to Spanish art, made clear in a self-portrait drawing from 1880 (no.69), from Budapest's own collection, on the verso of which are two figure groups sketched from one of Goya's *Disasters of war* print series. Viewed from the front, the figure studies are visible through the thin sheet and appear as images evoking the themes of captivity and liberation from the past that run through the exhibition. Paintings from the late 1860s, such as *The abduction* (1867; no.25) from the Keynes Collection at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, and *The murder* (1868–70; no.17) from the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, show Cézanne's early affinity not only with Spanish painting, for

example, Ribera and Goya, but also, closer to home, with the work of Géricault and Delacroix. Watercolour sketches for his projected but never executed painting *The apotheosis of Delacroix* made in c.1878–80 (no.22) and c.1890–94 (no.23) witness Cézanne's lifelong admiration for his predecessor, as does his shuddering watercolour *Medea* (1880–85; no.30; Fig.27), inspired by Delacroix's *Medée furieuse* of 1838; or, rather, by Marie-Alexandre Alophe's lithograph version published in the illustrated magazine *L'Artiste* in the same year (no.29; Fig.28).

This is an important qualification. As Anna Zsófia Kovács writes in the catalogue, around one tenth of the copies Cézanne made were from reproductions, lithographs and engravings, notably those included in the illustrated publications *Magasin pittoresque* and *L'Artiste*, as well as Charles Blanc's series *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles*, the first illustrated survey of European painting, as Mary Tompkins Lewis points out. These source publications were beautifully displayed alongside the drawings and include, for example, Blanc's volume on *L'Ecole espagnole*, open at the page Cézanne used for his copy of an engraving of Sebastiano del Piombo's *Christ in Limbo* (c.1869; no.34), ascribed there to the Spanish painter Juan Fernández Navarrete. Working from poor reproductions was not simply a matter of convenience, but also provided a distance from the original that allowed Cézanne to reimagine the source according to his needs, abducting a cast of characters and poses for later redeployment.

Cézanne made twenty-two copies and variants after Delacroix. As Sara Lichtenstein noted in her unsurpassed essay on the subject from 1964, this number was only exceeded by the works he made after Rubens.<sup>4</sup> One of Cézanne's nine drawings after the female figure Bellona (1879–82; no.71; Fig.29) in Rubens's *The apotheosis of Henry IV and the proclamation of the regency*, from the Medici cycle in the Louvre, is possibly his most powerfully expressive copy, and frequently reappeared as the stretching, sighing figure punctuating many of his bathing scenes. She is the principal figure in *Bathers outside a tent* (1883–85; no.141), from Stuttgart, the one dramatic figure in an otherwise lyrical tableau; memories of the Baroque original impart a shiver of energy and a sense of impending drama to the Arcadian scene.

The elongated twisting body of Bellona relates also to Cézanne's many drawings after the sculpture of Pierre Puget, represented here by one of the eighteen drawings (1890–94; no.81) made in the Louvre of Puget's *Hercules resting* from 1663. It is not the best representative of the 'ideal balance between

<sup>1</sup> G. Berthold: *Cézanne und die Alten Meistern*, Stuttgart 1958. In his review of Berthold's book, Theodore Reff provided a number of corrections and additions to Berthold's catalogue of source identifications; see T. Reff: 'Cézanne und die Alten Meistern by Gertrude Berthold', *The Art Bulletin* 42 (1960), pp.145–49.

<sup>2</sup> Catalogue: *Cézanne and the Past. Tradition and Creativity*. Edited by Judit Geskó with essays by Isabelle Cahn, Caroline Elam, Bruno Ely, Inken Freudenberg, Judit Geskó, Lukas Gloor, Ferenc Gosztonyi, Klaus Herding, Nancy Ireson, Anna Zsófia

Kovács, Peter Kropmanns, Péter Molnos, Richard Shiff, Mary Tompkins Lewis and Linda Whiteley. 528 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2012), £45. ISBN 978-963-7063-99-2.

<sup>3</sup> Emile Zola to Paul Cézanne, 16th April 1860; reprinted in J. Rewald, ed.: *Paul Cézanne Letters*, Oxford 1976, p.58.

<sup>4</sup> S. Lichtenstein: 'Cézanne and Delacroix', *The Art Bulletin* 46 (1964), pp.55–67, here p.59.

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27. *Medea*, by Paul Cézanne after Eugène Delacroix. 1880–85. Pencil, watercolour and gouache on white paper, 39.5 by 26 cm. (Kunsthaus Zürich; exh. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest).



28. *Médée furieuse*, by Marie-Alexandre (Menut) Alophe after Eugène Delacroix. 1838. Lithograph, 14.2 by 9.4 cm. (Département littérature et art, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; exh. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest).

tectonics and movement', as Klaus Herding describes these drawings in the catalogue, but one that nevertheless shows the degree of transformation that Cézanne wrought when he was confronted with highly animated sculpture.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, other drawings from sculpture are among Cézanne's most faithful renderings of original works. Two fine drawings of Michelangelo's *Dying slave* (1875–78; no.73; c.1900; no.74), also made in the Louvre, show subtly different views and give a strong sense of its physical presence. This is equally true of his drawings of Benedetto da Maiano's bust of Filippo Strozzi (1881–84; no.78) and of Francesco Laurana's bust of Beatrice of Aragon (1884–87; no.80), which were displayed here alongside the busts (a plaster cast in the latter case), as if to prove their fidelity.

Cézanne's drawing (1894–98; no.92; Fig.30) of Bernini's portrait bust of Cardinal Richelieu (Fig.31) is also compared with the original from the Louvre, a remarkable loan. Here we

can see how he captures the essence of the sculptural form, but also dissolves it from marble to flesh, such that we could be looking at a drawing made from life. His drawing (1892–95; no.90) after Martin Desjardin's c.1675 *Pierre Mignard* from the Louvre shows him both animating and flattening the face and giving the figure an entirely different character, older and more quizzical than the original. The same can be said for his drawing after Houdon's bust of Voltaire (c.1890; no.88), where Cézanne focuses on the mass of the head, while altering the expression, as though he were already thinking of the portraits in which the memory of Houdon, and of Voltaire, would play a part.

These transformations give some hint of one function of copying; a way of skirting the chronic problem Cézanne had of drawing from the live model and of hoarding prototypes of figures for re-use in later works. This idea would have been

<sup>5</sup> K. Herding: 'A Dramatic Interplay in Form and Expression: Cézanne and Puget', in Geskó, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.83–93, here p.85.

<sup>6</sup> T. Reff: 'Cézanne and Poussin', *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld*

*Institutes* 1/2 (1960), pp.150–74; see also R. Verdi, ed.: exh. cat. *Cézanne and Poussin: The Classical Vision of Landscape*, Edinburgh (National Galleries of Scotland) 1990.

worth separate treatment in the catalogue. Yet this is only one side of the story: there is a world of difference between this type of copying, and inspiration in a more general sense – the way, for example, in which his painting was steeped in his experiences at the Musée d'Aix and in the Louvre. Again, the distinction is not quite made clear in the exhibition or catalogue, despite being a strong feature of the display. Earlier paintings can exist as a model without the slightest formal resemblance to the works they inspire. Indeed, it might even be argued that the selective vision of the copyist – seeing in the model only that which may be useful – is where the connection with the past is at its most fragile.

It is in this way that Cézanne's relationship with Poussin, shown here by his *Landscape with the ashes of Phocion* (1648), forms a separate and unique case of influence. It is a relationship that has been subjected to more attention and revisionism than any other pairing, in particular following Theodore Reff's comprehensive debunking of the myths surrounding Cézanne's own statements about his forebear.<sup>6</sup> The material evidence is slim – there are only three known drawings made by Cézanne after Poussin. Yet the affinities are impossible to deny, as is the sense of the two as grand old gatekeepers either side of a tradition of French classical landscape painting. A small, scratchy ink drawing by Poussin (c.1640; no.94) of an artist's studio shows four youths engaged in various activities; one makes a drawing from a sphere, a cylinder and a cone, exactly the geometric shapes that Cézanne later recommended to Emile Bernard as the basis of all artistic form. The comparison of two versions, in oil (1868–70; no.41) and watercolour (1880s; no.42), of a view of the alley between two rows of chestnut trees leading to the Jas de Bouffan with Poussin's *Landscape with a Roman road* (1648), represented not unreasonably by Etienne Baudet's 1684 engraving, showed not only the deep connection between their respective views of the classical landscape, but also a coincidence of motifs so striking (particularly in the case of the Frankfurt watercolour) that one begins to think that the grounds of the Jas itself were modelled after Poussin's original. Not reproduction but recollection, the involuntary reflex of memory, is here the decisive factor. We may trace Cézanne's bathers back to Titian and Giorgione, or his still lifes back to Delacroix and Chardin, or his card players back to the Le Nain brothers without quite saying how, and in the absence of any smoking guns authenticating the connection. Affinities with the past are more powerful when considered genetically, as a matter of shared origins, than deterministically, as a matter of cause and effect.

Where the display was both generous and compact in its treatment of these vital matters, the catalogue is lengthy and diffuse, raising as many questions as it answers. More, for example, might have been said about the difficulties presented by Cézanne's drawings, the questions around their status in relation to the paintings, and the problems of dating inadvertently raised by Adrien Chappuis's shaky catalogue raisonné. The lack of information about the actual extent of Cézanne's copies after the old masters is even more puzzling. The opportunity to provide a list of all known copies by Cézanne after other works of art, effectively an updating of Berthold's list, now over half a century old and still untranslated, seems to have been missed.

Excellent by contrast are the essays dealing with the reception of Cézanne's works, notably a wide-ranging introduction to his reception in Hungary. Ferenc Gosztonyi recounts the fascinating example of Leo Popper, who allied Cézanne with



29. *Bellona*, by Paul Cézanne after Peter Paul Rubens. 1879–82. Pencil on laid paper, 45 by 26 cm. (Private collection; exh. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest).

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, on the basis of his concept of *Allteig*, meaning a kind of universal materiality out of which their paintings were woven, and placed in contrast to the unity of atmosphere in Impressionist painting. Roger Fry first came to Cézanne through Bernard Berenson and his own study of Italian art, and it was on the basis of their shared grandeur and pictorial values that Fry came to accept Cézanne as a modern master, as Caroline Elam describes in her contribution. The formalist approach was well suited to these comparisons across time and cultures. Cézanne's attachment to Signorelli is certainly a case in point; Fry saw in the Umbrian painter a proto-modern quality that had equally repelled earlier connoisseurs. These and other connections are evoked in the final room of the exhibition, a selection of portraits of those writers and art historians who inscribed the past onto Cézanne's work. Edvard Munch's portrait of the German critic Julius Meier-Graefe (born in Hungary) signals the presence of one of the most important early writers on Cézanne, although not singled out as such for attention in the catalogue.

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30. *Cardinal Richelieu*, by Paul Cézanne after Gian Lorenzo Bernini. 1894–98. Pencil on paper, 21 by 12.3 cm. (Kunstmuseum, Basel; exh. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest).



31. Detail of the *Portrait of Cardinal Armand-Jean du Plessis, duc de Richelieu*, by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. 1640–41. Marble, 83 by 65 by 33 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris; exh. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest).

It may yet be that the result of such a searching inquiry into Cézanne's engagement with the past is, in fact, to undermine the premise of this exhibition, and to show that for Cézanne the past was ultimately a burden, something he could have well done without. His debt to his contemporary Camille Pissarro is concisely demonstrated with several works made around Auvers and Pontoise in the early 1870s, showing some of Cézanne's first major encounters with nature, and the beginnings of his mature style. Cézanne's 1872 copy of Pissarro's *Louveciennes*, made the previous year (not on display), shows him copying from a living older master. His magpie approach to copying, the highly generalised manner of his relationship with major figures, notably Poussin, and the truly revolutionary appearance of his paintings all seem to point towards an almost violent escape from the past, on the basis of an encounter with

nature and the evolution of a highly personal technique. And it was an escape not just from the Museum, but from the 'pastness' of past art, its historical feel; after all, what could be more 'present' than nature? A selection of late watercolours displayed in Budapest proves this point; it is here that the history of Western painting is finally abandoned for the sake of the momentary spectacle of nature, a sudden revelation of the glass-like surface of the *Lac d'Annecy*, or a brute tangle of trees and rocks, signifying nothing other than a bare moment captured and conveyed. What Cézanne retains from the Museums is a sense of grandeur and life, those elements that surge through the architecture of his compositions; but never technique, nor a particular view of nature. These he created for himself. Each act of copying was less an act of homage, than a taking leave of the past.