



1885-87

Oil on canvas

18 1/8 x 15 1/16 inches
(46 x 38.3 cm)

Frame: 26 5/8 x 23 5/8 x 3 7/8 inches
(67.6 x 60 x 9.8 cm)

PAUL CÉZANNE

French

The Louis E. Stern Collection,
1963, 1963-181-6

LET'S LOOK

Who is this woman?

What kind of expression
is on her face?

What colors do you
see in her face?

What is happening in
the background?

Is this painting finished
or unfinished?

PORTRAIT OF MADAME CÉZANNE

Paul Cézanne painted this portrait of his wife, Hortense, almost twenty years after their first meeting. Hortense was a young artist's model working in Paris when they met and fell in love. She became Cézanne's wife and one of his favorite subjects; he made at least forty-four paintings and numerous drawings of her. Cézanne was famous for making the people he painted pose for hours at a time, over and over—as many as seventy-four times! Perhaps Madame (Mrs.) Cézanne was one of the few who had the patience to sit so long and so often for him.

Each portrait of Madame Cézanne is different. Some show only her head and shoulders, as in this painting. Others show her full length, in a variety of settings. Sometimes Cézanne simply changed her hairstyle or the tilt of her head. He was extraordinarily sensitive to subtle visual changes, such as how light affected the tones and shadows in Hortense's face, how the contours (edges) of her face shifted depending on where he stood, and how her expressions changed.

Look at the variety of colors Cézanne used in painting the highlights and the shadows on his wife's face. Ranging from pearly white to blue-gray to dusky rose (and even green!), these colors model the forms of her jaw, cheeks, eyes, ear, nose, and mouth. You can also find traces of these colors in her hair and dress and elsewhere in the painting.

Madame Cézanne is posed in a three-quarters view—turned partway between a full-face view and a profile view. Notice how the artist has used sketchy, broken lines rather than smooth, continuous ones to define the edges of her oval-shaped face—her chin, left cheek, and hair. These broken lines suggest that the edges are not set but change constantly in relation to our point of view as we move, even slightly.

Are there other parts of this painting that look sketchy? Find an area that is unpainted and other areas that are only thinly painted. Some experts think that the brown and green forms at the top of the painting are from an earlier landscape, while others believe that Cézanne started painting a piece of embroidered cloth in this section. In any case, look at how similar these colors and shapes are to those he used in painting *Madame Cézanne*. Imagine how different the painting would be if the darker colors at the top were instead very light, pastel colors. Because these areas are painted in almost the same tones (degrees of light or dark) as her hair and dress, *Madame Cézanne* appears to be in a shallow space rather than a deep one—she and the background both seem to be close to us.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Paul Cézanne was born in 1839 in Aix-en-Provence (pronounced EX-on-pro-VANCE), a small city in southern France. As a boy, Paul was a good student and enjoyed learning Latin and Greek and writing poetry. He and his best friend, Émile Zola, who became a famous writer, often roamed the countryside together, swimming in the river, having picnics, and reading books. Cézanne's lifelong love of nature took root in these carefree days.

Paul's father, a banker, hoped that his son would become a lawyer. After trying law school, however, Paul realized that he really wanted to become an artist. His father reluctantly agreed to provide him with enough money to live and study art in Paris. There, Paul practiced drawing models in a studio, visited museums to copy works by great artists, and made friends with Impressionist painters. His friend Émile Zola was also living in Paris, beginning his career as a writer. The two young men met frequently and went on country excursions together. At this time in his life, Paul's paintings show a wide range of subjects in many different styles, often using dark colors applied thickly with a palette knife.

Cézanne's life changed dramatically when he fell in love with Hortense Fiquet, who worked as an artist's model. In 1872 Paul, Hortense, and their new baby, also named Paul, moved to Auvers-sur-Oise (pronounced "ohVARE-SIR-WOZ"), a village north of Paris. In this new setting, Cézanne's painting was transformed. Like the Impressionists, he worked on his landscapes outdoors, painting from nature using visible brushstrokes and bright colors. After a few years, his painting went in yet another direction. Cézanne moved further away from the Impressionist style and invented new ways of depicting space—based on his own perceptions and feelings as he looked at his subjects—and used contrasting, warm and cool colors instead of shading to model forms.

Cézanne grew so absorbed in making his art that he became a loner, spending more and more time living in southern France apart from his artist friends and even Hortense and Paul, who preferred Paris. He broke off his friendship with Zola because he was insulted that Zola had written a novel whose tragic main character resembled Cézanne.

Toward the end of Cézanne's life, his paintings were finally exhibited, sold, and highly praised in Paris. Yet the artist remained modest: "I've made some progress. Why so late and so painfully? Is Art, then, a priesthood demanding pure beings who belong to it completely?"

One day in 1906, already suffering from diabetes, Cézanne was surprised by a thunderstorm when painting outdoors. He collapsed and remained in the rain for several hours, catching a chill. He died a week later.

CÉZANNE—THE FATHER OF MODERN ART?

Cézanne was rejected many times by the Salon (the official annual art exhibition in Paris) and was ridiculed by art critics when his paintings were exhibited with the Impressionists'. Yet within his lifetime Cézanne was considered a master by artists his age and by younger painters who came to visit his studio in Aix.

Two of the younger artists inspired by Cézanne's work wrote: "Cézanne is one of the greatest of those who changed the course of art history . . . From him we have learned that to alter the coloring of an object is to alter its structure. His work proves without doubt that painting is not—or not any longer—the art of imitating an object by lines and colors, but of giving plastic [solid] form to our nature." (Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger in *Du Cubisme*, published in 1912.)

Pablo Picasso referred to Cézanne as "the father of us all" and claimed him as "my one and only master!" And painters as diverse as Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Paul Gauguin, Kasimir Malevich, Georges Rouault, Paul Klee, and Henri Matisse acknowledged Cézanne's genius.

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Where do you think Madame Cézanne is sitting—indoors or outside? Why?

Opinions about the expression on Madame Cézanne's face vary. What is yours?

Why? Consider the tilt of her head, the look in her eyes, and the way she is holding her mouth.

Opinions also vary on how Cézanne felt about painting his wife. Some think that he treated her like a still life, an arrangement of objects on a table. (He once told a person whose portrait he was painting to “remain still like an apple. Does an apple fidget?”) Others see great tenderness in the artist’s pictures of his wife. After debating, express your opinion by taking a class vote on this issue.

HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

Have you noticed how Madame Cézanne’s head is shaped like an egg and her neck is shaped like a cylinder? Draw an egg shape and a cylinder shape. Make them look three-dimensional by adding some shading.

List the colors you see in the shadows on Madame Cézanne’s face. Now list the shadow colors you see in the face of the person next to you. Make another list of the new shadow colors you see when the two of you move to another part of the room or sit near a window.

Make some thick patches of red, yellow, green, and blue using oil pastels on paper. Then color over each patch with white oil pastel. Notice how this changes the original colors to lighter ones. Do any of these light colors match the colors in the painting? Try to make them match as close as you can.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Write definitions for the following words used in the Overview: contours, reluctantly, highlights, palette knife, model, dramatically, tones, perceptions, carefree. Choose five of these words and use them to write a paragraph describing who or what you would like to paint—a portrait, a landscape, or a still life—and why.
- Madame Cézanne spent many long hours posing for her husband. What do you think she thought about? Take five-minute turns posing and sketching with a partner. Write a paragraph describing what you thought about while posing.
- Cézanne was a moody, passionate man who often felt misunderstood. Write an interior monologue about times in your life when you have felt misunderstood.

This painting is included in The Figure in the Impressionist Era, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.