CHAPTER ONE

The Origins of Modern Art

'To the historian accustomed to studying the growth of scientific or philosophical knowledge, the history of art presents a painful and disquieting spectacle, for it seems normally to proceed not forwards but backwards. In science and philosophy successive workers in the same field produce, if they work ordinarily well, an advance; and a retrograde movement always implies some breach of continuity. But in art, a school once established normally deteriorates as it goes on. It achieves perfection in its kind with a startling burst of energy, a gesture too quick for the historian's eye to follow. He can never explain such a movement or tell us how exactly it happened. But once it is achieved, there is the melancholy certainty of a decline. The grasped perfection does not educate and purify the taste of posterity; it debase it. The story is the same whether we look at Samian pottery or Anglian carving, Elizabethan drama or Venetian painting. So far as there is any observable law in collective art history it is, like the law of the individual artist's life, the law not of progress but of reaction. Whether in large or in little, the equilibrium of the aesthetic life is permanently unstable."

So wrote one of the greatest modern philosophers of history and one of the greatest philosophers of art. The same philosopher observed that contemporary history is unwrittable because we know so much about it. 'Contemporary history embarrasses a writer not only because he knows too much, but also because what
he knows is too undigested, too unconnected, too atomic. It is only after close and prolonged reflection that we begin to see what was essential and what was important, to see why things happened as they did, and to write history instead of newspapers.28

The present writer can claim to have given close and prolonged reflection to the facts that constitute the history of the modern movement in the arts of painting and sculpture, but he does not claim that he can observe any law in this history. On the contrary, the fundamental self-contradiction that is inherent in all history, according to Collingwood, is nowhere more apparent than in the history of our subject. Modern art, we might say, begins with a father who would have disowned and disinherit his children; it continues by accident and misunderstanding; and can only be given coherence by a philosophy of art that defines art in a very positive and decisive manner.

This philosophy defines art as a means of conceiving the world visually. There are alternative methods of conceiving the world. We can measure the world and record our measurements in an agreed system of signs (numerals or letters); we can make statements about the world based on experiment. We can construct systems that explain the world imaginatively (myths), But art is not to be confused with any of these activities: it is an ever-living question, asked of the visible world by the visual sense, and the artist is simply the man who has the ability and the desire to transform his visual perception into a material form. The first part of his action is *perceptive*, the second is *expressive*, but it is not possible in practice to separate these two processes: the artist expresses what he perceives; he perceives what he expresses.

The whole history of art is a history of modes of visual perception: of the various ways in which man has seen the world. The naive person might object that there is only one way of seeing the world—the way it is presented to his own immediate vision. But this is not true—we see what we learn to see, and vision becomes a habit, a convention, a partial selection of all there is to see, and a distorted summary of the rest. We see what we want to see, and what we want to see is determined, not by the inevitable laws of optics, or even (as may be the case in wild animals) by an instinct for survival, but by the desire to discover or construct a credible world. What we see must be made real. Art in that way becomes the construction of reality.

There is no doubt that what we call the modern movement in art begins with the single-minded determination of a French painter to see the world objectively. There need be no mystery about this word; what Cézanne wished to see was the world, or that part of it he was contemplating, as an object, without any intervention either of the tidy mind or the untidy emotions. His immediate predecessors, the Impressionists, had seen the world subjectively—that is to say, as it presented itself to their senses in various lights, or from various points of view. Each occasion made a different and distinct impression on their senses, and for each occasion there must necessarily be a separate work of art. But Cézanne wished to exclude this shimmering and ambiguous surface of things and penetrate to the reality that did not change, that was present beneath the bright but deceptive picture presented by the kaleidoscope of the senses.

Great revolutionary leaders are men with a single and a simple idea, and it is the very persistency with which they pursue this
idea that endows it with power. But before I relate the stages of this pursuit, let us ask why, in the long history of art, it had never previously happened that an artist should wish to see the world objectively. We know, for example, that at various stages in the history of art there have been attempts to make art "imitative"; and not only Greek and Roman art, but the Renaissance of Classical art in Europe, were periods of art possessed by a desire to represent the world "as it really is". But there always intervened between the visual event and the act of realizing the vision an activity which we can only call interpretation. This intervention seemed to be made necessary by the very nature of perception, which does not present to the senses a flat two-dimensional picture with precise boundaries, but a central focus with a periphery of vaguely apprehended and seemingly distorted objects. The artist might focus his vision on a single object, say a human figure or even a human face; but even then there were problems such as, in a painting, that of representing the solidity of the object, its place in space.

In every instance, before Cézanne, in order to solve such problems the artist brought in extra-visual faculties—it might be his imagination, which enabled him to transform the objects of the visible world, and thus create an ideal space occupied by ideal forms; or it might be his intellect, which enabled him to construct a scientific chart, a perspective, in which the object could be given an exact situation. But a system of perspective is no more an accurate representation of what the eye sees than a Mercator's projection is what the world looks like from Sirius. Like the map, it serves to guide the intellect: perspective does not give us any glimpse of the reality.

One might have concluded from the history of art that reality in this sense is a will-of-the-wisp, an actuality we can see but never grasp. Nature, as we say, is one thing; art quite another. But Cézanne, though he was familiar with "the art of the museums", and respected the attempts of his predecessors to come to terms with nature, did not despair of succeeding where they had failed, that is to say, in "realizing" his sensations in the presence of nature.

Paul Cézanne was born at Aix-en-Provence on 19th January 1839; he died at Aix on 22nd October 1906. Most of his life belongs to the history of Impressionism, and it is only what is unique in him, and caused a break with the Impressionists, that should concern us now. He exhibited with his fellow Impressionists for the last time in 1877. He contemplated exhibiting with them the next year, but the exhibition was postponed and by 1879 Cézanne had decided not to exhibit with them again. His decision was conveyed in a brief letter to Camille Pissarro, dated 1st April of that year. His excuse was "the difficulties raised by the picture he sent to the Salon", but though Cézanne undoubtedly resented more acutely than his fellow-painters the public ridicule that the Impressionist exhibitions had aroused (he always had the ambition to be accepted by the public), yet we may be sure that he had begun to experience a growing feeling of divergence from their aims. To the end of his life he retained a respect for Monet and
Pissarro, but more and more he retired within himself, to develop his own ‘recherches’, and it was this isolated and concentrated effort that led to his revolutionary achievement.

Cézanne was not a revolutionary by temperament, and it is not easy to explain why his work should nevertheless have become so significant for the future development of art. The explanation depends on the proper understanding of two words frequently used by Cézanne—words which are perhaps deceptive in that they are superficially identical in English and French—the words ‘realisation’ (réalisation) and ‘modulation’ (modulation). ‘Réaliser’ means to bring into being—in Cézanne’s use of the word it has no overtones of a literary or academic ‘realism’; ‘moduler’ means to adjust a material (in this case paint) to a certain pitch or intensity (in this case, of colour). Cézanne’s method of painting was first to choose his ‘motif’—a landscape, a person to be portrayed, a still-life; then to bring into being his visual apprehension of this motif; and in this process to lose nothing of the vital intensity that the motif possessed in its actual existence.

To ‘realise’ his visual apprehension of the motif was the first problem, because of the difficulty, already mentioned, of finding a focus, a structural principle of any kind. The first stage in the solution of the problem was to select a suitable motif. The typical Impressionist, like Monet, was prepared to find a motif anywhere—in a haystack or a lily-pond—it did not matter because his primary interest was in the effects of light. This led eventually to a degree of informality in his painting that was only to be fully appreciated and developed by another generation of artists half a century later. This was precisely one of the tendencies latent in Impressionism against which the ‘temperament’ of Cézanne instinctively reacted. Cézanne’s temperament was fundamentally classical. He was for structure at any cost, that is to say, for a style rooted in the nature of things and not in the individual’s subjective sensations, which are always ‘confused’. He felt he could not ‘realise’ his vision without an organisation of lines and colours that gave stability and clarity to the image transferred to the canvas. The ‘sensations’ which the Impressionists were so concerned to represent—subtle effects of changing light and movement—seemed to him to defeat the proper aim or probity of art, which was to create something monumental and enduring as the art of the great masters of the past. Not that one should imitate the great masters—they had achieved their monumentality by sacrificing the reality, the intensity of the visual image. His ambition was to achieve the same effect of monumentality while retaining the intensity of the visual image, and this is what he meant by ‘doing over Poussin entirely from nature’, ‘painting a living Poussin in the open air, with colour and light, instead of one of those works created in a studio, where everything has the brown colouring of feeble daylight without reflections from the sky’.

Cézanne always insisted that human perception was inherently ‘confused’—he refers in a letter to Joachim Gasquet to ‘those confused sensations that we bring with us at birth’; but he thought that by concentration and ‘research’ an artist should be able to bring order into this confusion, and art was essentially the achievement of such a structural order within the field of our visual sensations. He spoke of art being ‘theory developed and applied in contact with nature’; of treating nature ‘by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything in proper perspective so that each side of an object is directed towards a central point’. To achieve progress nature alone counts, and the eye is trained through contact with her. It becomes concentric by looking and working. I mean to say that in an orange, an apple, a bowl, a head, there is a culminating point; and this point is always—in spite of the tremendous effect of light and shade and colourful sensations—the closest to our eye; the edges of the objects recede to a centre on our horizon.8

One might say that Cézanne had discovered a contradiction inherent in the very process of art—a problem that was evident to the Greeks as we may gather from Plato’s discussion of mimèsis or imitation. The desire is to render the image of what we see, without any falsity due to emotion or intellect, any sentimental exaggeration or romantic ‘interpretation’; indeed, without any of the accidental properties due to atmosphere and even light—
Cézanne declared more than once that light does not exist for the painter. But the field of visual sensation has no precise limits, the elements within it are scattered or confused. So we introduce a focus and try to relate our visual sensation to this selected point. The result is what Cézanne himself called an "abstraction," an incomplete representation of the field of vision, a "cone," as it were, into which the objects focused fall with a sense of order or cohesion. This is what Cézanne meant by "a construction after nature"; this is what he meant by the realization of a motif; and this is what made him "the primitive of a new art."

The solution reached by Cézanne will seem to be too structural, too geometrical, unless we give full force to the other significant word in his vocabulary—modulation. The Impressionists had purified colour—had taken out "the brown gravy," the artificial chiaroscuro, so that colours could vibrate with their natural intensity. But their desire had been to create what has been called a visual cocktail—that is to say, a juxtaposition of colours that merged and produced an effect of vividness in the very act of perception. Their use of colour was as "impressionistic" as their use of line, and in the case of a painter like Renoir, their development was to towards a modelling use of colour, which is not what Cézanne meant by modulation. Modulation means rather the adjustment of one area of colour to its neighboring areas of colour: a continuous process of reconciling multiplicity with an overall unity. Cézanne discovered that solidity or monumentality in a painting depends just as much on such patient "masonry" as on the generalized architectural conception. The result, in terms of paint-application, is an apparent breaking up of the flat surface of a colour-area into a mosaic of separate colour-facets. This procedure became more and more evident during the course of Cézanne's development, and it is very obvious in a painting like Le Jardin des Laveurs in the Phillips Collection or in the late watercolours, such as the Landscape with Mill formerly in the Vollard Collection. An isolated detail from almost any painting done after 1880 will show the same mosaic surface-structure. It must be appreciated, however, that what we thus isolate to dissect into its constituent planes is, in the whole picture, completely integrated into the picture as a whole—the justification of such a technique for Cézanne is that it is "a good method of construction." As in a completed architectural monument, we should not be aware of the units that together constitute the unity.

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Before proceeding to estimate the influence of Cézanne on the future development of painting, it is very necessary to recall a warning expressed by Lionello Venturi in the critical study which he devoted to the artist in 1936. It would be the gravest of errors, he suggested, to see in Cézanne a precursor of all the tendencies of painting that came after him as it were, a seed from which a whole forest has grown. Venturi quotes Baudelaire: "The artist is responsible to no-one but himself. He donates to the centuries to come only his own works; he stands surety for himself alone. He dies without issue. He was his own king, his own priest and his own God." In that sense Cézanne died without issue—he was a