

Paul Cézanne: Possibly Autistic?

After reading over three hundred biographies of famous historical and present day figures, I have only come across three who might have actually been autistic: a pianist: Glenn Gould, a painter: Paul Cézanne, and a film actress: Greta Garbo, and the autisticness of each of these is open to question. In each case they struck me as being separate from their peers in a way that reminded me of autism, rather than due to choice or general temperament. Strangely, they do not generally appear on other people's lists of famous autistic people (with the exception of Gould). Perhaps this is because they were on the whole quieter and more low-key than some of the examples other people suggest. They also appear to have been more isolated.

I discuss Paul Cézanne here.

Paul Cézanne: basic biography

Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) was a self-taught French painter who divided his time between Paris and his native Provence. His work shocked contemporary audiences, but became popular with younger painters, including Van Gogh and Gauguin, and he is now considered one of the most important painters of his era. Even though he himself was a romantic with classical leanings, his work is considered a precursor to the modernists because of his innovations in technique. He worked with the Impressionists at one point, but later developed his own style. He was gifted at working with colours, and used colours to create three dimensions in his paintings. In addition to being an innovative painter, he was also a painter of Provence, strongly influenced by his love for the country he grew up in.

In his own time, his intense need for privacy, his eccentricity, his social awkwardness, his explosive temper, his “unpretty” paintings, and his perfectionism as a painter gave him the reputation of an uncivilized monster, a “wild man of art”, misanthropic and hallucinatory, possessed even. When he dropped out of the Paris art scene after his early years, he became the hermit-artist, a mystery to younger artists who had never met him. They thought he was holed up in Provence as a hermit, or dead, or perhaps even the pseudonym of a more famous artist who wanted to experiment under another name.

More recently, Cézanne has been taken as the model of the artist who works for his art, with no thought of profit or recognition, and who is isolated by his genius.

Cézanne's family and early years

Cézanne was born in Aix-en-Provence, France, and spent most of his life there, alternating with Paris and environs as an adult. His father, a self-made man who became wealthy first in retail then in banking, hoped Paul would follow in his footsteps. When, after college, a year-and-a-half of law school, and a short period working in his father's bank, it became apparent he would not, his father reluctantly gave him a lifelong allowance so that he could study painting. Paul continued to live in the family home until his mother's death, when he and his sisters had to sell it, since Paul was not practical enough to manage it. (He then moved into town and got a housekeeper. His sisters were already living elsewhere.)

Cézanne's family was central to his life. Paul was very close to his mother and Marie, the elder of his two sisters, for his entire life. His father dominated him until his death in 1886. His mother went to bat for him with his father whenever necessary. Paul was the one to take care of her in old age. Marie, two years younger, took charge of his life as soon as she was old enough, and helped him with practical matters throughout his life, starting in grade school.

Paul befriended Émile Zola, the future writer, in college in his early teens. Both he and Zola were misfits, and Paul, who was big for his age, was able to protect Zola from bullies. In return, Zola acted as the nucleus of a group of outsider boys who went on long hikes in their off-school hours, reading literature, writing poetry, acting out plays, and generally dreaming idealistic dreams. After college, Zola moved to Paris, and basically pressured Cézanne into joining him. It is likely that without Zola, Cézanne would have remained in Provence and not have gotten the training he did. He might not even have become a painter. Zola was determined to make Paul into a great artist, as Zola himself intended to be.

Paris

Cézanne had studied art in Aix at night school. In Paris, he applied to the *École des Beaux-Arts* (the official art school), but was rejected, because his work was too clumsy and unconventional. He continued his studies at the informal *Atelier Suisse*, but was basically self-taught. For a few years, he worked with the Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro, who taught him a great deal. In the end, though, Cézanne went his own way.

For years Cézanne tried to get his paintings exhibited at the annual Salon, the official point of entry for serious painters, but they kept rejecting his paintings because of how unconventional they were. (Many of the Impressionists' submissions were also frequently rejected.) He also exhibited in two of the early independent Impressionist exhibits (1874, 1877), but the Salon was more important to him, and eventually he got one painting exhibited, through the back door, as a "student" of one of the jurists (in 1882).

Cézanne didn't really fit in in Paris. He was not witty and sophisticated like other painters and writers in his circle, including Zola, who took to Paris readily. In reaction to Paris sophistication, he adopted a bohemian look, with rustic clothing and long hair and beard, and did not attempt to be particularly socially polished, if anything emphasizing his gaucheness to get on some people's nerves.

Fellow artists

Cézanne became acquainted with the Impressionists through people he met at the *Atelier Suisse*, who would introduce him to people, who would introduce him to people. He painted side by side with Camille Pissarro and Auguste Renoir at various times, but never really fit in socially. In the early days he would occasionally go to the coffee houses where the painters and other artistic types hung out, but he would sit in a corner or against the wall and only listen. When the wittiness got too much for him he'd get upset and leave.

Cézanne exhibited twice with the Impressionists, but there were arguments over whether his paintings should be included, because of their extreme eccentricity.

He regularly went to his friend Zola's Thursday salons, where his eccentricities were accepted because he was a friend of Zola's. He also attended a couple of other gatherings he was invited to, but these were exceptions to the rule. Usually he avoided the social scene.

In his later years he basically dropped out of the artistic social scene and lived like a hermit, only seeing a few people. There were times when he saw fellow painters on the street and avoided them, even though he had no quarrel with them.

Friendships

In general, Cézanne got along best with people who were very easygoing: Pissarro, Renoir, Zola, and Phillippe Solari, a sculptor he met in grade school. He did not generally seek people out, but met them at school, in art classes, or through introductions via people he'd already met. He seems to have been fairly quiet when at school — one friend commented that he talked more with friends and acquaintances after his first Paris visit. Most friendships crashed and burned after a while: Cézanne was very touchy and suspicious and often broke things off if things got too intense for him. The people who stayed in his life were the ones that rode out the storms. Solari, probably the most easy-going of his friends, was the only friend he had all his life, and one of the few he invited to his home. Cézanne's friendship with Zola ended after several decades when Zola published a novel with a character based on him, and Cézanne realized that Zola thought he was a failure as a painter. There were other problems — Zola was basically someone he no longer had anything in common with except a shared childhood, and the relationship ran out of steam. (And yet when Zola died, Cézanne cried.)

Late in life, Cézanne began socializing with young painters and writers in Aix, starting with the son of a childhood friend, then moving on to people this young man introduced him to. He seems to have found these people less threatening than his age-peers, and was more relaxed with them for the most part. But for most of his life, he was seriously isolated most of the time.

Marriage and fatherhood

Cézanne began a common-law relationship with Hortense Fiquet, ten or eleven years younger than him, in 1869 or 1870, and they had a son, Paul, Jr., who was born in 1872. No one really knows how they met, or how they ended up together, but considering that Cézanne was extremely shy around women, it is considered likely that Hortense engineered most of it. After Paul Jr.'s birth, Hortense's attention shifted to her son, and Cézanne's to his painting. Hortense appears to have been fairly conventional and sociable, preferring the activity of Paris to the quiet of Aix. She and Cézanne don't seem to have had much in common, and they often lived apart, Hortense often staying in Paris when Cézanne went to the country.

Hortense appears to have been realistic in her expectations for the relationship. She was not particularly interested in Cézanne's art, but she did pose for him patiently, and she does not seem to have made much in the way of demands on him.

Cézanne kept the existence of Hortense and Paul Jr. a secret from his father for years out of fear that his father would disapprove and cut off his allowance, but ended up marrying her publicly in 1886, a few months before his father died. By this time any intimacy was long over, although they did stay married, and he supported her and Paul Jr. fairly generously when he had the means.

Cézanne was very fond of his son. He was ready to forgive him any escapade in advance, and when it turned out that Paul Jr. had the same business savvy as Cézanne's father, Cézanne was happy to put it to use — his son acted as intermediary with an agent in Paris, and both Paul Jr. and the agent got commissions on sales. Paul Jr. appears to have been equally affectionate, and was generally considerate of his father's foibles.

Other than Hortense, and a possible brief fling with a maid shortly before his marriage to Hortense, Cézanne does not seem to have been involved with women. It is generally assumed he was far too shy for this.

What was he like as a person?

Cézanne was usually described as shy and timid. He himself described himself as “weak in life”, unable to stand up to his father, and reliant on Zola, his mother, his older sister, and later his son to take care of practical matters for him, since he was fairly helpless at them himself. (He was not good at place names, dates, and checklists of things to do, and often missed trains, for example. In addition, he found logistical issues such as buying tickets to a play far more complex than his peers did. And he was unable to manage the family home after both his parents died, so they had to sell it.) Increasingly distrustful, insecure, and sensitive to slurs as he grew older, he was frequently afraid he was being made fun of. He was also usually afraid of people “getting their hooks into him”, wanting something from him he didn't have to give. He was also remote, aloof from others his whole life except when others were able to draw him in, and his isolation increased as he grew older. Part of this was a general unworldliness, part was his lack of social ability.

Social situations were difficult for him. In addition to being shy, he was socially awkward, ill at ease, lacking social *savoir faire*. In Paris he wore his painting clothes — baggy, untidy, paint covered, rustic in style — to social events instead of changing like the other painters and writers in his crowd. This was not a pose — it was who he was, genuinely provincial, rough around the edges. He was also too deep and sincere, and brutally honest, for the witty crowd. He generally avoided social events even when Zola and others tried to get him to go. Sometimes he exaggerated his gaucheness by acting particularly eccentric and boorish. He may have exaggerated his Provençal accent as well. Given how he sometimes laid it on, it's no surprise he was seen as an ill-mannered barbarian by the Parisian elite. They probably didn't realize he had a college education and was middle class.

Cézanne was stubborn and unbending — he didn't like discussing his decisions or having friends such as Zola try to change his mind. He had to make up his own mind, and then he had to be allowed to stick to it.

Cézanne was also subject to angry fits his whole life, starting as early as age three or four. They didn't last long, but while they lasted, they shocked and frightened people. As an adult, if a painting wasn't working out, he'd slash his canvas and destroy it before stomping off. If a social situation was too stressful, he'd stomp off, possibly saying something strong on the way out (he was known for his foul language). He also cut people out of his life dramatically when something went wrong in the relationship. Abnormally thin skinned, nerves easily frayed, his hypersensitivity interfered with a lot of relationships, but his friends learned to ride these storms out.

When he wasn't angry, he was generally happy and easy going. People who approached him in a non-threatening way usually found him easy to get along with, courteous and gentle in private. He also tended to be polite in most social situations, sometimes exaggeratedly so out of caution, and was chivalrous with women when he did interact with them.

Cézanne was also prone to mood swings, sometimes alternating between intense enthusiasm and deep depression or moodiness. These dark moods never lasted long, and don't seem to have significantly impaired him. It seems more that he just had intense emotions than anything else, with a solid base to his personality that kept him stable.

He was sometimes, unpredictably, extremely uncomfortable being touched. If someone touched him unexpectedly he might fly into a rage, though at other times he might not be bothered at all. Pissarro's children were warned not to touch him, his housekeeper was instructed not to let her skirts brush against him, his son was always careful to ask first, and a young painter who reached out to steady him when he stumbled once as an old man was met with explosive anger, though Paul recovered later and did not end the relationship. He also panicked at the sight of a crowd of people demonstrating in a street once and left the town without telling his family. (He wrote them from the next town.)

Cézanne was not generally attached to possessions, with the exception of the family country house, Jas de Bouffon. Guests were surprised by the simplicity of his furnishings — a few basic pieces of furniture, and usually nothing on the walls. He also travelled light, and was frugal with money in large things, though a young acquaintance describes him as being generous to people who asked for money in his later years in Aix. Restless, he moved frequently when he wasn't at Jas de Bouffon.

Surprisingly in someone known as a barbarian, he was intelligent, shrewd and alert. He was also well-read, with a deep love and knowledge of literature and classic languages. He didn't want to draw attention to himself — his privacy was very important to him — and he wanted his work to speak for itself, so he didn't bother correcting the public's misperceptions.

What was he like as a painter?

Cézanne is known mostly for his still lifes and his landscapes. These were easier for him to do because for most of his career he worked very slowly and it was difficult to get models to pose for him for long periods of time. He would tell them “be an apple”, i.e. be as still as an apple in a still life — something that is not easy to do. He seemed to need a physical model of what he was painting in front of him in order to paint. But he also had difficulty working with models for other reasons. He had a hard time working when anyone else was in the room with him, even his own model. When he did paint portraits, he often did most of the work after the person left for the day, spending the modelling period making mental notes, then painting them in when the person was gone. Painting female nudes was even harder. He was known to panic, hustling one model out the door before she'd had a chance to finish getting dressed, and he changed his female models frequently in the earlier years. In his later years he used very few models. He also did many self-portraits from photographs, moreso than most painters, which may also have made it easier for him to do portraits at all.

Cézanne was very hard working, continuing his painting even after his inheritance made work unnecessary. Painting was his therapy. He needed to be able to concentrate. He couldn't handle being watched, disturbed by chatter, or interrupted. Any unexpected change in his routine, including things being moved around or removed from his studio, could disrupt his concentration for the rest of the day. He was also extremely sensitive to noise — street sounds, talking, a dog barking, noisy machinery or hammering could also be a serious problem.

Cézanne was committed to painting his way, rather than letting academic principles stifle his inner vision, as he saw so often happen with other painters, one reason he needed to be self-taught. His early paintings were painted quickly and intensely, with paint so thick it was nearly sculpture. His later paintings were done slowly, with each stroke of paint thought out thoroughly before it went on the canvas: a combination of strong emotions, intense concentration, and strict control. When he couldn't get a painting to work out, or when someone disrupted his concentration and he lost what he was doing, he often flew into a rage and cut up the canvas with a palette knife or otherwise destroyed it. He once threw a canvas out a window into a tree, and occasionally left studies behind in the fields where he'd been painting.

Cézanne was not interested in being a rebel — he actually wanted to be respected by the establishment. He just couldn't fit in without giving up his artistic voice, which he refused to do. But as it happened, this painter who wanted to be a classicist ended up being an inspiration to modernists.

His work life

Cézanne graduated from college at the age of twenty, then spent a year-and-a-half in law school at his father's wish before going off to Paris to do painting for a summer. He then worked in his father's bank for a while before giving up and returning first to art, then to Paris for more training. From this point on, he was supported by an allowance from his father, and later by a substantial inheritance, and did not need to work for a living. He did not seem to think he could earn a living at anything except painting, and he did not start to sell many paintings until later in life.

Cézanne spent years trying to get a painting exhibited in the annual Salon, without success, until a supportive jury member snuck a painting in the backdoor as a student painting. He did exhibit with the Impressionists twice in an independent exhibit before eventually giving up on the Paris scene and going his own way. After this, he was "represented" by a paint dealer in Paris, Père Tanguy, who collected his works and showed them to other painters and collectors. One of these, Ambroise Vollard, decided to represent him in his gallery. Cézanne's son acted as agent between them. In general, he was not able to "sell" himself or his work to people, except those few painters who were familiar with his work.

How was he the same as/different from other painters?

Many good painters of the time struggled for public acceptance, because their work did not conform to current norms, and the public openly laughed at their paintings. Cézanne was one of these, and often came in for the worst scorn, but he was just one of many who struggled for acceptance. By his later years he was beginning to sell more paintings, through Père Tanguy and Vollard, so his work wasn't completely rejected, either.

Furthermore, his inability to sell himself to the public should not be taken as diagnostic of anything, since artists are not expected to have to do that today. That is what agents are for. (Although undoubtedly some are better at marketing themselves than others, both now and in Cézanne's time.)

What singles out Cézanne from his contemporaries was his isolation from them. They were all different from each other. Pissarro was easygoing, for example, while Manet was witty and sophisticated. Some were wealthy, some struggling or impoverished. But they all seem to have socialized as much as they wanted to. Cézanne, on the other hand, repeatedly tried to socialize, and repeatedly failed, retreating over and over again into isolation and burying himself in his work to compensate. This may or may not have been good for his work, since on the one hand he had lots of time to devote to it, but on the other hand he was under stress, which makes it harder to do creative work. (He destroyed many canvases over the years.) He does seem to have wanted to be less isolated but was unsuccessful in achieving that, even though he had ample opportunity and sufficient funds to socialize. Something inside himself seems to have been cutting him off from other people. It does not seem to have been social anxiety per se, though he was socially anxious. It appears to have been an underlying lack of social ability. It's like he just couldn't do it, without a lot of help from the other person. It's his profound social isolation from his peers that makes me think he may have been autistic. There doesn't seem to have been any other reason that would account for it.

Why diagnose Cézanne?

Cézanne is an example of an artist who was not able to fit in or earn a living but, with sufficient financial support and mentorship, was able to develop his talent and subsequently make valuable contributions to art. It is worth knowing that such people have existed in the past, and it is useful to see what helped them and what didn't. It is possible that considering Cézanne as a possible role model for autism in adulthood today will make the special problems of adulthood more visible for today's autists.

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