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Charles Stuckey

book review of

*Cézanne and Provence: The Painter in His Culture* by Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer

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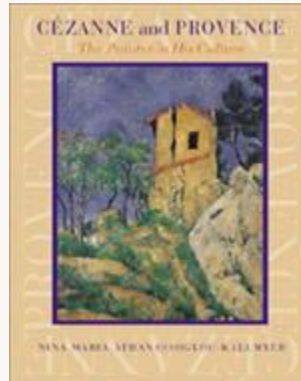
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*Cézanne and Provence: The Painter in His Culture*

Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003

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"What has erased the sea and soil of Provence from your heart? What fate has abducted the sparkling sunshine of your childhood? In your sadness, recall somehow what joy shined on you there and what peace can shine on you there yet again." So at the beginning of the second act of Verdi's *La Traviata*, 1853, does Germont console his wayward son Alfredo, trying to rescue him from the urban vices of Paris. The following year, 1854, a group of Provençal poets formed the *Félibrige*, an association for the appreciation and preservation of local language and customs of France's most southeastern region. With this very much in mind, Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer considers the competing claims of Provence and Paris for the political and cultural soul of the nineteenth century's most venerated and perhaps least understood artist, Paul Cézanne, who was fifteen years old in 1854. The book expands enormously on the author's now often cited September 1990 *Art Bulletin* article (included here without much change) about the anti-Imperial implications of Cézanne's portrait of the Provençal dwarf painter, Achille Empéaire, 1867-68 (Musée d'Orsay), a satirical recasting of an earlier pro-Imperial portrait by a painter from the South of France, Ingres's *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne*, 1806 (Musée de l'Armée). In her own words, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer's thesis is as follows: "Inverting accepted practice in Cézanne studies that launch their explorations of his oeuvre through the lens of Parisian cultural and aesthetic assumptions, I have here redirected my focus to the cultural context of contemporary Provence and relegated the capital to a foil." To be sure, some of her suggestions need to be tempered. It may be that the stereotypical Provençal is bearded, virile and fond of jokes, but the same attributes apply to plenty of mid-nineteenth-century artists with no connection whatsoever to the South of France, from Courbet to Whitman. Stereotyping aside, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer otherwise investigates far more important issues and provides exciting insights into the Impressionist who often abandoned Paris for his native Aix-en-Provence, even while his wife was determined to abide in the capital with their son.

Touching on the obscure subject of the women in Cézanne's life, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer ventures that the artist repeatedly portrayed them as hopelessly unfashionable by Parisian standards, and she insinuates that his marriage may have gone sour because his wife was unable to share his stubborn disdain for up-to-date fashions. Sometimes it is hard to assess the author's insights because of an absence of supporting materials. For example, some sort of comparative illustration or footnote seems needed for her claim that in *Madame Cézanne dans la serre*, 1891-92 (Metropolitan Museum of Art), the artist's wife wears a dress already ten years out of fashion. Moreover, some of the author's other insights remain superficial when she ignores possible non-Provençal factors in order to bolster her case for the hypothetical Provençal overtones, as happens in her discussion of Cézanne's images of his mother and sisters. Take the odd little double-sided painting now at The Saint Louis Art Museum, one side supposedly a portrait of the artist's sister, Marie, and the other supposedly a likeness of their mother (of whom no photograph exists, to my knowledge). Athanassoglou-Kallmyer identifies these same two women as the models for Cézanne's *Overture du Tannhäuser*, 1869-70 (Hermitage Museum), despite John Rewald's stated inability to see any facial resemblance among the women in this group of works and his skepticism that immediate family members did indeed pose for *Overture*, considering how the detailed early descriptions of the work fail to mention as much. Without new information about the women's identities, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer's thesis that their mode of dress has specifically Provençal overtones for Cézanne amounts to wishful thinking.

At least as likely, the Saint Louis portraits were made in response to Realist works that Cézanne saw in Paris: perhaps Whistler's quite similar *Old Mother Gérard*, 1858-59 (Private Collection), so appreciated by Courbet, or, more probably, two small heads of women included in the large private Courbet exhibition presented in 1867. These portray women with near identical features to the women in the double St. Louis Cézanne: *La Voyante*, c. 1855 (Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon) and *La Méditation*, 1864, (Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai), the model adorned with a fichu. Despite their lack of any connection with Provençal issues, Courbet's works repeatedly transfixed Cézanne in the late 1860s and early 1870s. While Athanassoglou-Kallmyer suggests, reasonably enough, that Cézanne signed the name "Ingres" to the *Four Seasons* murals he painted at his father's house in Aix-en-Provence in the early 1860s in order to identify with the famous painter from the South of France (the Midi, which includes Provence), she makes no mention of a later mural project for the same abode, including a bather scene (today in the Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA) based on another Courbet painting (*The Bathers*, 1853, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) included in the same 1867 exhibition in Paris as the two heads of women. Judging from the close similarities between Cézanne's crude erotic paintings of lesbians together in bed and pulling on white stockings, the Provençal painter also has access to Courbet's Paris studio where he saw the great erotic paintings (not in the 1867 show) that the Franche-Comté artist painted in seeming response to Manet's controversial modern life nude subjects. Moreover, Cézanne's famous still-lives with apples are presumably a tribute to the similar anti-Republican "red" apple still-lives that he would have seen had he visited Courbet in detention in 1872, as it seems likely he did.

For me, chapter four of *Cézanne and Provence* had the most exciting revelations, based on a reconsideration of the paleontologist's career of Cézanne's boyhood friend, Antoine-Fortuné Marion, who already in the mid-1860s excavated and published neolithic sites

around Mont Sainte-Victoire. Considering Cézanne's familiarity with his friend's discovery of prehistoric human skulls and tools, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer makes it clear that the concept of time in Cézanne's landscapes was more complex than the instantaneity of orthodox Impressionism. Indeed, Cézanne's painstaking efforts to render his immediate sensations were rooted in a profound awareness of ancient geological time measured from an epicenter at Mont Sainte-Victoire. Thanks to Athanassoglou-Kallmyer's research, Cézanne's famous *vanitas* still-lives, early and late, can now be understood as meditations on Provence as a locus for the advent of primitive man so convincingly demonstrated by Marion's excavations of prehistoric skulls. As she points out, Marion's death in 1900 must have prompted Cézanne's late versions of the theme (p. 103). Exciting, but nevertheless perhaps less significant is the connection Athanassoglou-Kallmyer makes between the striated chipping marks on primitive flint tools (considered as advanced art by Marion) and Cézanne's "signal brushwork of parallel diagonal strokes that both constructed and deconstructed solid forms into dematerialized, evanescent, vibrant surfaces." Preceding Athanassoglou-Kallmyer in her effort to comprehend Cézanne in specifically Provencal terms, van Gogh suggested in June 1888 that the odd brushwork might bear witness to the region's harsh winds: "You won't find the almost timid, conscientious brush stroke of Cézanne in [my new paintings]. I couldn't help thinking of Cézanne from time to time, at exactly those moments when I realized how clumsy his touch in certain studies is—excuse the word clumsy—seeing that he probably did these studies when the mistral was blowing. As half the time I am faced with the same difficulty, I get an idea of why Cézanne's touch is sometimes so sure, whereas at other times it appears awkward. It's his easel that's reeling." (*The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, Boston, New York Graphic Society, 1958, III, pp. 498-99, letter no. B9 [12]) (Van Gogh's hypothesis would explain why Cézanne's dear friend, Renoir, used the same sort of facture when he painted in Provence, but then it would hardly explain its use for so many of Renoir's Normandy landscapes.)

One of the most important early collectors of Cézanne's paintings, Gauguin, like van Gogh, thought of Cézanne with specific reference to Provence, its landscape the modern counterpart of the mythical golden age Arcadia described in the poetry of Virgil. Writing in 1885 to his friend Emile Schuffenecker, Gauguin described "the misunderstood Cézanne" as "a man of the Midi, [who] spends whole days on mountaintops reading Virgil and looking at the sky, with the result that his horizons are high, his blues very intense and the red in his work has an astounding vibrancy. Like Virgil who has several meanings and whom one can interpret at will, the literature of his paintings has a parabolic sense with two purposes; his backgrounds are as imaginative as they are real." [Victor Merlhès, ed., *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin*, 1873-1888, Paris, Fondation Singer-Polignac, p. 88 #65 Jan 14, 1885—my translation.] The influential critic Gustave Geffroy (not Champfleury as misstated in Athanassoglou-Kallmyer's text, p. 187) shared Gauguin's awareness that Cézanne's paintings of Provence evoked an ancient poetic Arcadian world.

Mistrals, prehistoric flint tools, and Virgilian poetry may be important parts of the Cézanne story, but his art addresses equally important issues with no special connection to Provence, and consequently Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, as she corrects accounts of Cézanne distorted by too little consideration of Provence, risks substituting a comparably incomplete and imbalanced account of his art with nothing but Provence under consideration. For example, while she is correct to insist that Cézanne's many repetitious paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire are quite different in concept from Monet's famous serial versions of a single motif,

striking similarities between the artists' works can hardly be disregarded. What might have been Cézanne's reaction to Monet's six paintings of Mount Kolsaas included in his historic 1895 solo exhibition at the Galerie Durand-Ruel? No less than Monet's paintings of Norway, or van Gogh's paintings of Arles, Cézanne's paintings of Provence are guided by his appreciation of Japanese woodcuts, in particular the famous *Thirty-six Views of Fuji*, 1829-33. Yet Hokusai goes unmentioned in this text about Provence. Cézanne's deep feelings for his homeland aside, throughout his career he spent many years partly in Paris, accounting for the similarities between his mature works and those by other leading Impressionists. For example, judging from the appearance of Cézanne's watercolors and oils painted in the park of the Château-Noir beginning around 1895, with intimations of muscular torsos and thighs in the rock walls, he had presumably attended the exhibition of fantastical landscapes by Degas presented in Paris in September 1892, some revealing the vestiges of human figures embedded in the rocks like sculpted traces of some ancient human presence. Judging from his works, Cézanne had an abiding interest in the art of Degas, and vice-versa. A group of theatrical Harlequin theme works by Degas, one dated 1885, seemingly inspired Cézanne's 1888-90 Mardi Gras paintings, but excluding any account of these particular Degas works, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer instead connects Cézanne's interest in the theme to the revival of the Carnival in Aix in 1889. Why not take everything into consideration?

Cézanne surely had in mind Degas's 1879 portrait of Edmond Duranty (Glasgow Art Gallery) when in the spring of 1895 he undertook his ambitious portrait of Gustave Geffroy (Musée d'Orsay). Cézanne had met the ultra-liberal art critic on one of his trips away from Provence, in November 1894 when he visited with Monet in Giverny. As if seeking to promote his former Impressionist colleague, whose works he had begun to collect, at this time Monet introduced Cézanne to his influential art world friends, Geffroy, Georges Clemenceau, Octave Mirbeau, and Auguste Rodin. Oddly, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer disregards the likelihood that Monet and his friends played a key role in encouraging the first solo exhibition of Cézanne's paintings in Paris at the gallery of Ambroise Vollard at the end of 1895. Instead, she emphasizes the fact that Vollard, whose mother had distant family connections in Provence, had studied at the University of Montpellier. Since Vollard had not met Cézanne by 1895 when he staged the exhibition, and since its specific contents are mostly uncertain, one wonders why Athanassoglou-Kallmyer suggests that the works included had been "carefully selected."

But if Montpellier, located slightly west of Provence, nevertheless counts as a Midi context with appeal to Cézanne's homeland mindset, then why leave out Frédéric Bazille? The two works Bazille prepared for the Salon of 1870—one accepted, the other refused—evidently make a lasting impression on Cézanne; Bazille's *La Toilette*, 1869-70 (Montpellier, Musée Fabre), has more in common than any Manet painting with the first version of Cézanne's so-called *Modern Olympia*, c. 1870 (Private Collection). More important, Bazille's *Scène d'été*, 1869, (Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA), is the obvious prototype for the many male bather paintings undertaken by Cézanne beginning around 1875.

But the absence of Bazille from Cézanne and Provence is less curious than the absence of any discussion of the works of the seventeenth-century Marseilles sculptor, Pierre Puget. In her very helpful section about the generic building types specific to Provence, examples of which abound in landscapes by Cézanne, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer refers to Maisons en

Provence—*La Vallée de Riaux près de L'Estaque*, 1879-82 (National Gallery, Washington, D. C.), with its large *cabanon*, the home of Puget, according to a 1990 article by Lawrence Gowing and John Rewald. But curiously, she omits any discussion of Cézanne's well-documented obsession with works by Puget, most of all an armless figure of Cupid, lost today, but attributed to Puget during the nineteenth-century. Cézanne owned a plaster cast of the sculpture, which served as a centerpiece for two of his greatest late still-life paintings (Courtauld Institute Galleries, London; and Nationalmuseum, Stockholm).

Of course, such omissions do not so much undermine Athanassoglou-Kallmyer's thesis as they serve to bolster her case that Cézanne studies can be much enlightened if specialists pay more attention to his affection for the very rich heritage of his homeland in the Midi and its heartland in Provence. Widely appreciated by his colleagues and collectors, Cézanne's stubborn love for the landscape of Provence was an essential factor in the development of what turned out to be the most influential mode of painting created by any of the French Impressionists. By putting the garlic back in Cézanne studies, so to speak, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer deserves our heartfelt appreciation, no matter how much she has left open for future debate.

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