

# the letters of **PAUL CÉZANNE**

Edited and translated by Alex Danchev

 **Thames & Hudson**

## FOR D.

**On the endpapers:** Letter to Philippe Solari, 30 January 1897.

Private collection. Courtesy Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits, Paris.

**p. 1:** Envelope addressed by Cézanne to Gustave Geffroy, 17 May 1898.

**pp. 2-3:** Letter to Victor Chocquet, 7 February 1879.

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catalogue, and buy any titles that are in print.

Hortense was a woman of humble origins who had to fend for herself from a young age. She was plainly not his intellectual equal; she seems to have had no great regard for him as a painter; and, most seriously, she developed a taste for the good life to be found in Paris or in Switzerland, but not in Aix. It is widely believed that she and Cézanne did not have much in common, apart from their son, and that soon enough she came to mean rather little to him. Against that prejudiced account should be set at least twenty-four portraits, painted over a period of twenty years, long after they had ceased to live together all the time. Cézanne studied his wife more intently and more durably than he did anyone else, except perhaps himself, to extraordinary effect. Absent or present, no one ever took her place – certainly not the unknown woman who precipitated the emotional crisis of 1885 (see letter 128). Hortense herself was at once more ‘delicate’ and more resourceful than is generally allowed. She even transacted business on behalf of her husband, and she could hold her own in socializing with him (see letters 150 and 254).

Paul Cézanne junior (1872–1947) became effectively his father’s agent. He had no other role in life, unless it was as a kind of guardian for his mother. Cézanne doted on him, encouraging him unstintingly by letter, though he was not blind to his shortcomings (see letter 223). After his father’s death, Paul passed the time selling the paintings and gambling on the stock exchange. So dissipated his inheritance.



#### 54 • TO HIS MOTHER<sup>1</sup>

[Paris] 26 November 1874

*Ma chère Mère,*

I must first of all thank you very much for thinking of me. For some days now the weather has been bad and very cold. But I’m not suffering in any way, and I’m making a good fire.

I shall be pleased to receive the promised parcel, you can always address it to 120 Rue de Vaugirard, I have to be there until January.

Pissarro has not been in Paris for about a month and a half, he is in Brittany, but I know that he has a good opinion of me, and I have a good

opinion of myself. I am beginning to consider myself stronger than all those around me, and you know that I hold that good opinion advisedly. I have to work all the time, but not to achieve the finish that earns the admiration of imbeciles. And that thing that is so widely valued is nothing more than a workman's craft, and makes all the resulting work inartistic and common. I must strive for completion purely for the satisfaction of becoming truer and wiser. And believe you me, there always comes a time when one asserts oneself, and one has admirers much more fervent and more convinced than those who are attracted only by mere surface.

It is a very bad moment for sales, all the bourgeois baulk at parting with their sous, but that will end.

[...]

My dear Mother, remember me to my sisters.

Greetings to Monsieur and Madame Giraud and my thanks.

Ever yours, your son.

Paul Cézanne

- I This letter is known only from Gustave Coquiot's early study *Cézanne* (1914), which indicates that a few lines have been omitted (shown by [...]), perhaps because Cézanne mentioned people still alive when that book was first published. The date given by Coquiot and followed by others, 26 September, does not square with the dates of Pissarro's movements, which suggest that September is a misreading of November. It is evident from other letters that 'Girard' in Coquiot (and elsewhere) is a misreading of 'Giraud'.



[Paris] 28 August 1877

*Mon cher Émile,*

I turn to you once again to tell my mother not to worry. I've changed my plans. It happens that that scheme [wintering in Marseille] seems to be fraught with difficulties. I'm abandoning it.

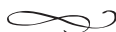
However, I'm still planning to go to Aix in December, or rather towards the beginning of January.

My sincere thanks.

Paul Cézanne

Let me add greetings to your family.

Yesterday evening, on the way to my paint supplier [Père Tanguy] in the Rue Clauzel, I bumped into good old Empereire.



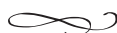
Paris, 4 March 1878

The undersigned, Paul Cézanne, *artiste peintre*, residing in Paris, 67 Rue de l'Ouest, hereby acknowledges a debt of two thousand one hundred and seventy-four francs and eighty centimes to Monsieur and Madame Tanguy, for painting materials received.

Paul Cézanne

<sup>1</sup> Père Tanguy, Cézanne's paint supplier and informal dealer in this period. Tanguy was a Communard, lucky to escape with his life, and a true believer in progressive causes and progressive artists. Perennially impoverished, he gave Cézanne credit on painting materials – extended credit (see letter 139) – with scant prospect of recouping anything

much in the way of sales. At bottom, he was not interested in sales. Tanguy was not so much a dealer as a defender, and in his humble way a connoisseur. 'Papa Cézanne is never content with what he's done,' he would tell awed visitors avid for any scrap of information on the legendary master. 'He always stops before it's finished. When he moves, he takes care to forget the canvases in the house he's leaving; when he paints outdoors, he leaves them in the countryside. He works very slowly. The smallest thing costs him great effort. He leaves nothing to chance. Cézanne goes to the Louvre every morning.' Tanguy was a saint. He died, penniless, in February 1894. His stock contained nothing later than the mid-1880s. With Émile Bernard's assistance, he had managed to sell the portrait of Empereur, but it seems that by accident or design he had not been entrusted with any recent work.



## 63 • TO ÉMILE ZOLA

[L'Estaque] 23 March 1878

*Mon cher Émile,*

I seem to be on the verge of having to fend for myself, if indeed I'm up to it. Relations between my father and myself are becoming very tense, and I risk losing my entire allowance. A letter from Monsieur Chocquet in which he mentioned Madame Cézanne and little Paul provided conclusive proof of my situation to my father, who by the way was already alert, full of suspicions, and who had nothing better to do than to unseal and be the first to read the letter that was sent to me, even though it was addressed to Monsieur Paul Cézanne *artiste peintre*.

So I shall appeal to your goodwill towards me to see if among your circle and through your influence you can find me something, if possible. All is not yet lost between my father and me, but I think my fate will be settled within a fortnight.

Write to me (addressing your letter to Monsieur Paul Cézanne, post restante), whatever you decide to do about my request.

So please don't reply, my letter should arrive in due course.

I thank you and beg you to forgive me.

I'm beginning to paint, but [only] because I'm more or less worry-free. I'm going every day to Gardanne, and coming back each evening to the countryside in Aix [to the Jas].

If only I had had an indifferent family, everything would have been for the best.

Warmest wishes to you,

Paul Cézanne



139 • JULIEN TANGUY TO PAUL CÉZANNE [extract]

Paris, 31 August 1885

*Mon cher Monsieur Sézanne,*

I begin by wishing you good day and at the same time inform you of my distress; imagine, my idiot of a landlord has just sent me an order of seizure [a notice of eviction] for the six months' advance rent that I owe him according to our lease, but since it is impossible for me to satisfy him, I turn to you, dear Monsieur Sézanne, to ask you to make every effort to send me a small payment of your account, in this connection I am enclosing the statement for which you asked, which amounts to 4,015.40 francs after deducting your payment of 1,442.50 francs, as detailed below.

I have an IOU for two thousand, one hundred and seventy-four francs 80 centimes (2,174.80) signed by you on 4 March 1878. Thus you should give me an IOU for 1,840.90 for the account of 4,014.40 that you owe. ...

I should be most grateful, *cher Monsieur*, if you could come to my assistance at this critical moment.

[...]



Aix, 15 April 1904

*Cher Monsieur Bernard,*

When you receive this you will very probably have received a letter coming from Belgium, I believe, and addressed to you at Rue Boulegon [Cézanne's apartment]. The testimony of artistic sympathy that you are kind enough to send me by writing to me made me happy.

Allow me to repeat what I told you here: to treat nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone, everything put in perspective, so that each side of an object, of a plane, leads to a central point. Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth, be it a section of nature or, if you prefer, the spectacle that Pater Omnipotens Oeterne Deus spreads before our eyes.<sup>2</sup> Lines perpendicular to this horizon give depth. Now, we men experience nature more in terms of depth than surface, whence the need to introduce into our vibrations of light, represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient quantity of blue tones, to give a sense of atmosphere.

Allow me to tell you that I've had another look at the study you did from the ground floor of the studio. It's good. I believe you need only to continue along that path. You know what should be done, and you'll soon be able to turn your back on the Gauguins and Gogs [Goghs].

Please thank Madame Bernard for the kind remembrance of the undersigned, a big kiss from Père Goriot for the children, all my respects to your good family.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is the first of an important series of letters addressed to the young painter Émile Bernard (1868–1941), whose unfeigned admiration and determined cultivation provoked Cézanne to some of his most intriguing reflections on art, life and self. Spiced with this first-hand evidence, Bernard's early writings are foundational texts: 'Paul Cézanne' (1904), about which they corresponded, and 'Memories of Paul Cézanne' (1907), which appeared a year after Cézanne's death, at the same time as the revelatory retrospective of his work at the 1907 Salon d'Automne. As Cézanne complained, Bernard had a penchant for theorizing. He also had form: he had already admired, cultivated and corresponded with Gauguin and Van Gogh. It is not often remarked that Cézanne



(nine letters in 1904–06) and Van Gogh (twenty-two letters in 1887–89) had Bernard in common, and indeed other minor characters such as the amateur Dr Gachet and the colour merchant Père Tanguy. The comparison between those two habitual letter-writers and fabled temperaments is an interesting one – as Bernard himself must have realized, for he staged a fictitious encounter between them, in Tanguy’s paint shop. Van Gogh is supposed to have shown Cézanne his work and asked for his opinion. ‘After inspecting it all, Cézanne, whose character was timid but violent, said to him: “Truly, you paint like a madman!”’ The invention is instructive. Bernard’s testimony has the ring of authenticity, yet it is not completely reliable.

- 2 When the young Allen Ginsberg discovered Cézanne, as a student in 1948–49, he became an avid reader of the letters. He was especially taken with this expression, which later found its way into his homage to the artist in *Howl* (1956):

Who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through  
images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul  
between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and  
set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping  
with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus.

According to his neighbour in Aix, Cyril Rougier, Cézanne would sometimes remark on how a man or a woman resembled a cylinder. Evidently he said something similar to Maurice Denis and Ker-Xavier Roussel when they visited him in 1906. He may well have found some support for this conception in his reading. As on other subjects, Cézanne was more widely read in the theoretical literature than is often supposed. His annotated copy of the 1891 edition of Jean-Pierre Thénot’s *Les Règles de la perspective pratique* (1839) has only recently come to light. Thénot’s *Morphologie, ou l’art de représenter ... des corps solides* (1838) mentions the cylinder, the cone and the sphere (in that order). In *Règles du paysage* (1841) he emphasizes the value of grey, as did Cézanne.

- 3 Cézanne was a lifelong devotee of Balzac. He kept a battered copy of the *Études philosophiques* (1837), containing among other things *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu* (1831), by his bed. He advised Léo Languier to reread Balzac, in particular the *Comédie humaine*, and talked to him of Rastignac, the protagonist of *Père Goriot* (1835). With Bernard’s

children he seems to have identified himself as Goriot. The novel feasts on death obsession, and Cézanne's allusion to it has been interpreted as reinforcing the artist's own preoccupation with death. Cézanne was acutely aware of mortality and of his failing health, but here the identification seems more playful. Among other things, Goriot was a vermicelli-maker, which would have appealed to Cézanne's sense of humour, in connection with his fictional alter ego Claude Lantier in *L'Œuvre*. See letter 77.



234 • TO ÉMILE BERNARD

Aix, 12 May 1904

*Mon cher Bernard,*

My commitment to work and my advanced age will explain well enough the delay in replying to you.

Moreover, you wrote to me about such a variety of things in your last letter, though all of them relate to art, that I cannot follow all of your argument.

As I have told you, I much admire [Odilon] Redon's talent, and I share his feeling and admiration for Delacroix. I don't know whether my precarious health will ever allow me to realize my dream of painting his apotheosis.<sup>1</sup>

I am proceeding very slowly. Nature appears to me very complex, and the improvements to be made are never-ending. One must see one's model clearly and feel it exactly right, and then express oneself with distinction and force.

Taste is the best judge. It is rare. Art speaks only to an excessively small group of people.

The artist should scorn all opinion not based on the intelligent observation of character. He should be wary of the mind of the *littérateur*, who so often diverts the painter from his true path, the concrete study of nature, to waste too much time in abstract speculation.

The Louvre is a good book to consult, but it should be only a means. The real, prodigious study to undertake is the diversity of the scene offered by nature.

Thank you very much for sending your book; I look forward to reading it in a restful frame of mind.

If you think it is a good idea, you can send Vollard what he asked for.

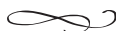
Please give Madame Bernard my respectful greetings, and a kiss for Antoine and Irène from their adoptive father.

Cordially yours,

P. Cézanne

I The project was never fully realized. On the back of an earlier sketch for an apotheosis of Delacroix, Bernard stumbled upon another of Cézanne's verses. The original drawing has been dated to the late 1870s; Cézanne took it up again twenty years later and added some watercolour (RWC68). If the verse is contemporaneous with the sketch, then it appears that he continued to fight his talent, as he said, for longer than is generally thought – or else that the poetaster made an unscheduled return.

Here is the young woman with the curvaceous buttocks.  
How well she flaunts herself in the setting of the meadow,  
Her supple form, splendid blossoming;  
No serpent has greater suppleness  
And the sun obligingly shines  
Some golden rays on that flesh.



*The Apotheosis of Delacroix*, 1878–80. Pencil, pen, ink and watercolour,  
20 x 22 cm (7 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.).

235 • TO ÉMILE BERNARD

Aix, 26 May 1904

*Mon cher Bernard,*

I approve for the most part the ideas that you are going to develop in your forthcoming article for *L'Occident*. But I always come back to this: the painter should devote himself completely to the study of nature, and try to produce paintings that will be an education. Talking about art is virtually useless. Work that leads to progress in one's own *métier* is sufficient recompense for not being understood by imbeciles.

The *littérateur* expresses himself in abstractions while the painter gives concrete expression to his *sensations*, his perceptions, by means of line and colour. One cannot be too scrupulous, too sincere, or too submissive to nature; but one is more or less master of one's model, and above all of one's means of expression. Fathom what you have in front of you, and make every effort to express yourself as logically as possible.

Please give my respectful greetings to Madame Bernard, a warm hello to you, and remember me to the children.

*Pictor P. Cézanne*



236 • TO ÉMILE BERNARD

Aix, 27 June 1904

*Mon cher Bernard,*

I received your esteemed letter of [blank], which I left in the country. If I delayed replying, it's because I've been in the grip of brain trouble, which prevented me from moving about freely. I remain in the grip of *sensations*, and, despite my age, set on painting.

The weather is fine, I'm taking advantage of it to work, I must do ten good ones, and sell them dear, since *amateurs* are speculating on them.

Aix, 25 July 1904

*Mon cher Bernard,*

I've received *La Revue occidentale* [*L'Occident*]. I can only thank you for what you have written about me.

I am sorry that we cannot be side by side, because I don't want to be right in theory, but in nature. Despite his *estyle* (Aixoï pronunciation) and his admirers, Ingres is only a very minor painter. The greatest, you know them better than I, the Venetians and the Spaniards.

In order to make progress in realization, there is only nature, and an eye educated by contact with it. It becomes concentric by dint of looking and working. I mean that in an orange, an apple, a ball, a head, there is a culminating point, and this point is always the closest to our eye, the edges of objects recede towards a centre placed at eye level.<sup>1</sup> With only a little temperament one can be a lot of painter. One can do good things without being either a great harmonist or a great colourist. All you need is an artistic sensibility. And doubtless this sensibility horrifies the bourgeois. So institutes, pensions and honours are only for cretins, jokers and rascals. Don't be an art critic, paint. Therein lies salvation.

Warm good wishes, your old comrade,

P. Cézanne

All my respects to Madame Bernard, and remember me to the children.

[Added in the margin near 'the edges of objects':]

despite the terrible effect, light and shade

[And near 'a little temperament':]

*sensations colorantes*

1 It may be that the listing here, 'an orange, an apple, a ball, a head', is what Giacometti had in mind when he explained to an interviewer in 1957 the lesson he took from Cézanne:

Cézanne revolutionized the representation of the exterior world. Until then, one valid conception reigned, since the Renaissance, since Giotto, to be precise. Since that time, there had been no fundamental alteration in the way of seeing a head, for example. The change between Giotto and the Byzantines was greater than that between Giotto and the Renaissance. After all, Ingres' way of seeing was almost a continuation. Cézanne blew sky high that way of seeing by painting a head as an object. He said as much: 'I paint a head like a door, like anything else.' As he painted the left ear, he established a greater rapport between the ear and the background than between the left ear and the right ear, a greater rapport between the colour of the hair and the colour of the sweater than between the ear and the structure of the skull – and because what he himself wanted was still to achieve a whole head, he completely shattered the idea that we had before of the whole, the unity of the head. He completely shattered the bloc, so completely that first of all we pretended that the head had become a pretext, and that, in consequence, painting had become abstract. Today, every representation that seeks to return to the previous way of seeing, that is to say the Renaissance way of seeing, is no longer believable. A head whose integrity would have to be respected would no longer be a head. It would be a museum piece. (Giacometti interviewed by Georges Charbonnier, 16 April 1957, in *Le Monologue du peintre* [1959] (Paris: Durier, 1980), pp. 186–87)

The remark about the head as object testified to one of Cézanne's lessons for his successors: no hierarchy of genre or subject or patch of paint. 'Equality of all things,' as the director Robert Bresson put it in his famous *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1975): 'Cézanne painting with the same eye and the same soul a fruit dish, his son, the Mont Sainte-Victoire'.



251 • TO A COLOUR MERCHANT

Fontainebleau, 6 July 1905

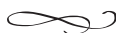
Yesterday I was pleased to take delivery of the canvases and paints that I had ordered from you, but I am awaiting impatiently the box that I had asked you to have mended for me by adding a palette with a hole big enough for my thumb.

Please send these items as soon as possible.

Regards.

P. Cézanne  
8 Rue de la Coudre  
(Fontainebleau)

Please add one bright yellow  
and one chrome yellow No. 2.



252 • TO A COLOUR MERCHANT

Fontainebleau, 14 July 1905

*Monsieur,*

I have received your various deliveries and now request you to send me

5 burnt lake [no.] 7 (Maison Chabot)

5 Veronese green [no.] 7 or 8 from [Maison] Bourgeois –

and 5 cobalt from the same house, *same number*.

Regards,

P. Cézanne





plenty to study and make lots of pictures of. Sheep also come there to drink, but they disappear a bit too quickly. Some house-painters came up to me and said that they'd like to do the same kind of painting, but they aren't taught it at the school of art; I said that [Auguste-Henri] Pontier [the director] was a foul oaf, they seemed to agree. As you can see, there's nothing new. It's still hot, there's no rain, and it looks as though there will be none for some time. I don't know what else to tell you, other than that four or five days ago I met Demolins [Gasquet's associate] and he seemed to me a complete fake. Our judgment must be much influenced by our mood.

I embrace you and maman with all my heart,  
Your father,

Paul Cézanne



267 • TO HIS SON

Aix, 8 September 1906

*Mon cher Paul,*

Today (it's nearly eleven) a new heat wave. The air is overheated, not a hint of a breeze. The only thing such a temperature is good for is to expand metals, encourage the sale of drinks, make beer merchants happy, an industry that seems to be attaining respectable proportions in Aix, and swell the pretensions of the intellectuals of my country, a load of old sods, idiots and fools.

The exceptions, and there may be some, keep their heads down. Modesty always conceals itself. Finally, I must tell you that as a painter I'm becoming more clear-sighted in front of nature, but the *réalisation* of my *sensations* is still very laboured. I can't achieve the intensity that builds in my senses, I don't have that magnificent richness of colour that enlivens nature. Here on the riverbank the *motifs* multiply, the same subject from a different angle provides a fascinating subject for study, and so varied that I think I could

occupy myself for months without moving, leaning now more to the right, now more to the left.

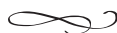
*Mon cher Paul*, in closing let me tell you that I have the greatest confidence in your *sensations*, which give your mind the direction it needs in looking after our interests, in other words I have the utmost confidence in your management of our affairs.

I learn with great patriotic satisfaction that the venerable statesman who presides over the political destinies of France [President Armand Fallières] is going to honour our country with a visit; for the people of southern France, their cup runneth over. Jo [Gasquet], where are you now? Is it the artificial and conventional things in the course of life on earth that lead to the surest success, or is it a series of happy coincidences that brings our efforts to fruition?<sup>1</sup>

Your father, who embraces you and maman,

Paul Cézanne

- 1 Evidently Cézanne's expressions of 'patriotic satisfaction' are not always to be taken straight.



## 268 • TO HIS SON

Aix, 13 September 1906

*Mon cher Paul*,

I'm sending you a letter I've just received from Emilio Bernardinos [Émile Bernard], most distinguished aesthete, whom I'm sorry not to have under my thumb in order to inculcate in him the sane, comforting and sole correct idea, of art developing in contact with nature. I can hardly read his letter, though I believe it is right; yet the good fellow turns his back completely on the things he expounds in his writings, and in his drawings he produces nothing but old-fashioned rubbish that smacks of the dreams

*Mon cher Paul*, I found Émile Bernard's letter. I hope he pulls through, but I fear the contrary.

Ever your

Paul Cézanne



275 • TO HIS SON

Aix, 15 October 1906

*Mon cher Paul*,

It poured with rain on Saturday and Sunday, it's much cooler now. In fact it's not hot at all. You're quite right to say that here we're deep in the provinces. I continue to work with difficulty, but finally there is something. That's the important thing, I think. Since *sensations* are my stock-in-trade, I believe I'm impervious. So I'll let the wretch (you know who) imitate me as much as he likes, he's not much of a threat.

When you have a chance, say hello to Monsieur and Madame Legoupil, who are so kind as to remember me. And don't forget Louis [Guillaume] and his family, and old Guillaume [the cobbler]. Everything goes by with frightening speed, I'm not doing too badly. I look after myself, I eat well.

Would you be kind enough to order me two dozen mongoose-hair brushes, like those we ordered last year.

*Mon cher Paul*, to give you the satisfactory news you want, I would have to be twenty years younger. I repeat, I eat well, and a little boost to morale would do me a power of good, but only work can give me that. All my compatriots are arseholes [*culs*] beside me.<sup>1</sup> I should have told you that I received the cocoa.

I embrace you, you and maman, your old father,

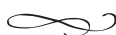
Paul Cézanne

I think the young painters are much more intelligent than the others, the old can only see me as a disastrous rival.<sup>2</sup> Ever your father

P. Cézanne

I'll say it again, Émile Bernard seems to me deserving of deep compassion, since he has to tend souls.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Not quite the sweeping denunciation it might seem: 'compatriots' in Cézanne's language meant people of the Midi or, more narrowly, Provence.
- 2 Possibly a comment on the survey conducted by the prestigious *Mercure de France* the previous year, on 'Current Trends in the Plastic Arts'. See the Introduction.
- 3 Perhaps a reference to Bernard's two small children, Antoine and Irène.



## 276 • TO A COLOUR MERCHANT

Aix, 17 October 1906

*Monsieur,*

A week has gone by since I asked you for ten burnt lakes no. 7, and I have had no reply. What is going on?

A reply, and a speedy one, I beg you.

Yours faithfully,

Paul Cézanne

