

Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) drew almost daily, using standard materials—watercolor and pencil in sketchbooks and on loose sheets—toward extraordinary ends. He hiked into the hills and dense forests of southern France for views of nature, envisioned scenes from his imagination, visited museums to study the art of the past, or turned to his wife, his son, his own likeness, and bottles, pitchers, and fruit, all subjects close at hand in his home and studio. Drawing was central to his efforts to, as he said, “give concrete expression to his sensations, his perceptions.”

Although Cézanne is best known for his paintings, he made many of his most radical works on paper. Defying convention, his drawings—whether vibrant still lifes, prismatic landscapes, or carefully choreographed bathers—record not only what the artist saw but also the experience of seeing, reflecting the ever-changing nature of perception. They also make visible the process of drawing: searching pencil lines multiply, repeat, twist, and tremble; transparent washes of watercolor capture fleeting effects of light and shadow; areas of unpainted paper convey presence as much as absence. Cézanne revisited the same subjects—the mass of a mountain or the shape of a bather—enlarging, reducing, reversing, and grouping each motif in never-ending chains of images.

According to fellow artist Maurice Denis, Cézanne believed that drawing each afternoon prepared him “to see well the following day.” To consider Cézanne drawing is to recognize his tireless efforts to look, and look again. Encouraging close study and exploring his materials and methods, this exhibition offers the opportunity to see through Cézanne’s eyes.

STUDY SHEETS

Cézanne often combined seemingly unrelated subjects—portraits, still lifes, landscapes, figures—on a single piece of paper. This type of multi-image drawing dates back centuries, but Cézanne infused the form with the spirit of the modern era. In his study sheets (as these works are known), he invited associations between motifs, using proximity, juxtaposition, superimposition, rhyme, repetition, and reversal to link the animate with the inanimate, the everyday with the exalted, the flat with the dimensional, and the observed with the imagined. Some drawings seem to propose a connection between a person and an object—an apple and a head, for example. In others, staged interactions produce little dramas or, thanks to surprising juxtapositions and unlikely shifts in scale, comedies. In these works, which serve as a key to the artist's larger practice, we see him testing out his ideas, using drawing as a way of thinking.

NARRATIVE SCENES

“I paint as I see, as I feel,” Cézanne declared in 1870, “and I have very strong sensations.” In the 1860s and ’70s, the young artist conveyed those sensations in his drawings, creating narrative scenes that range from biblical tableaux and lush banquets to depictions of sexual debauchery and grisly violence. He found inspiration in the work of earlier artists and in the lurid popular media of his era. Intimate in scale, these drawings take on outsize subjects. Compositional choices and densely deployed materials reinforce their sensational content: framing devices, such as curtains, introduce a sense of theatricality; squiggles of graphite indicate motion; slashes of ink describe aggressive force; and crimson streaks of watercolor suggest blood. The critic Georges Rivière, Cézanne’s contemporary, wrote of his works, “All the artist’s pictures are moving, because he himself experiences a violent emotion before nature.”

OBSERVATION AND IMAGINATION

According to Cézanne, the two attributes essential to the artist are “the eye for the vision of nature and the brain for the logic of organized sensations.” Cézanne’s dependence on both eye and brain—on observation and imagination—is particularly evident in the drawings he made based on classical and Baroque sculptures. Looking closely at plaster casts in his studio or carved marble in museums, Cézanne circled the objects, assessing shifts in form and shadow. Such studies became the basis of other works. For example, the twisted posture of a Roman statue of Marcellus that Cézanne studied at the Louvre fueled myriad drawings of standing male bathers, while a Christ figure copied from a book of engravings lent its form to a bather dipping his toe into the water. Such poses and gestures, initially observed and subsequently reimagined, reappear throughout the works in this and the next gallery.

TIME AND CONTEMPLATION

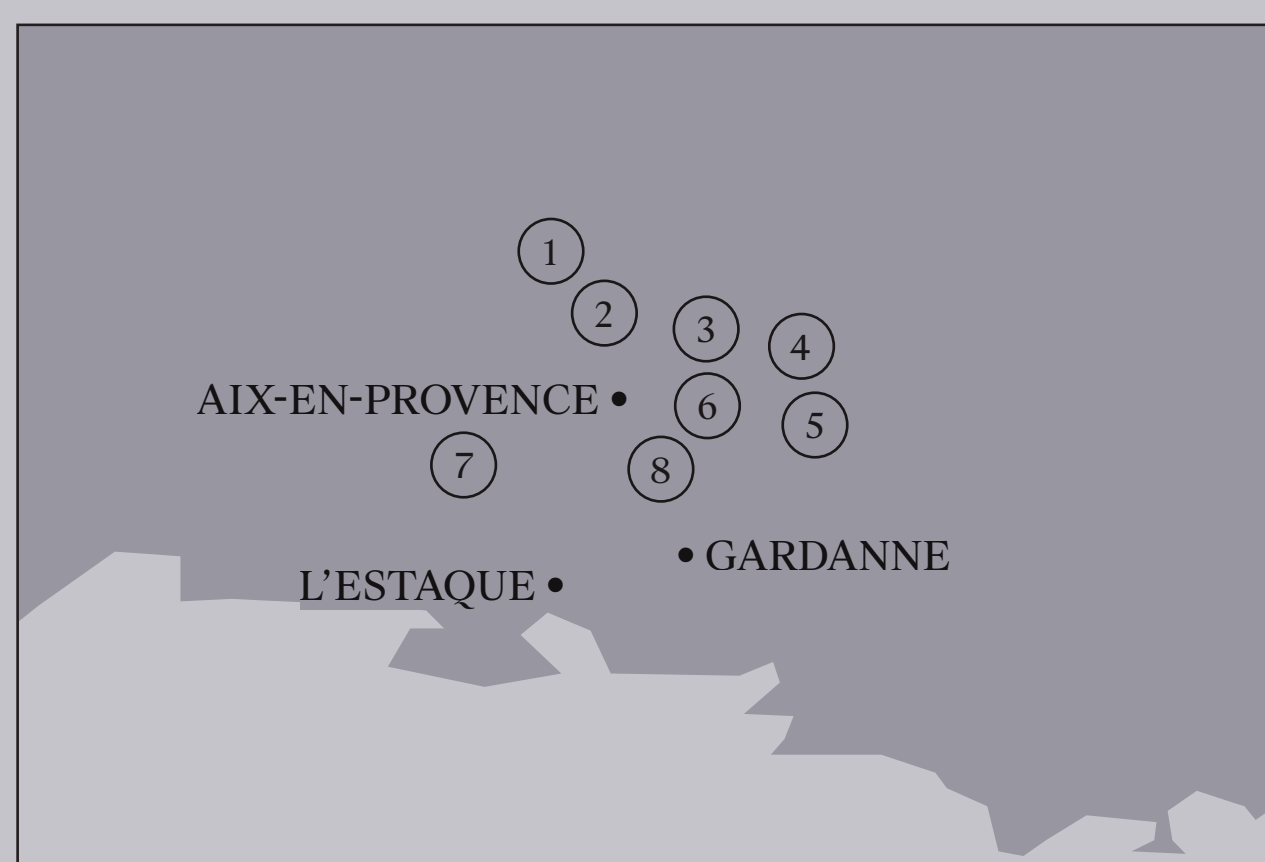
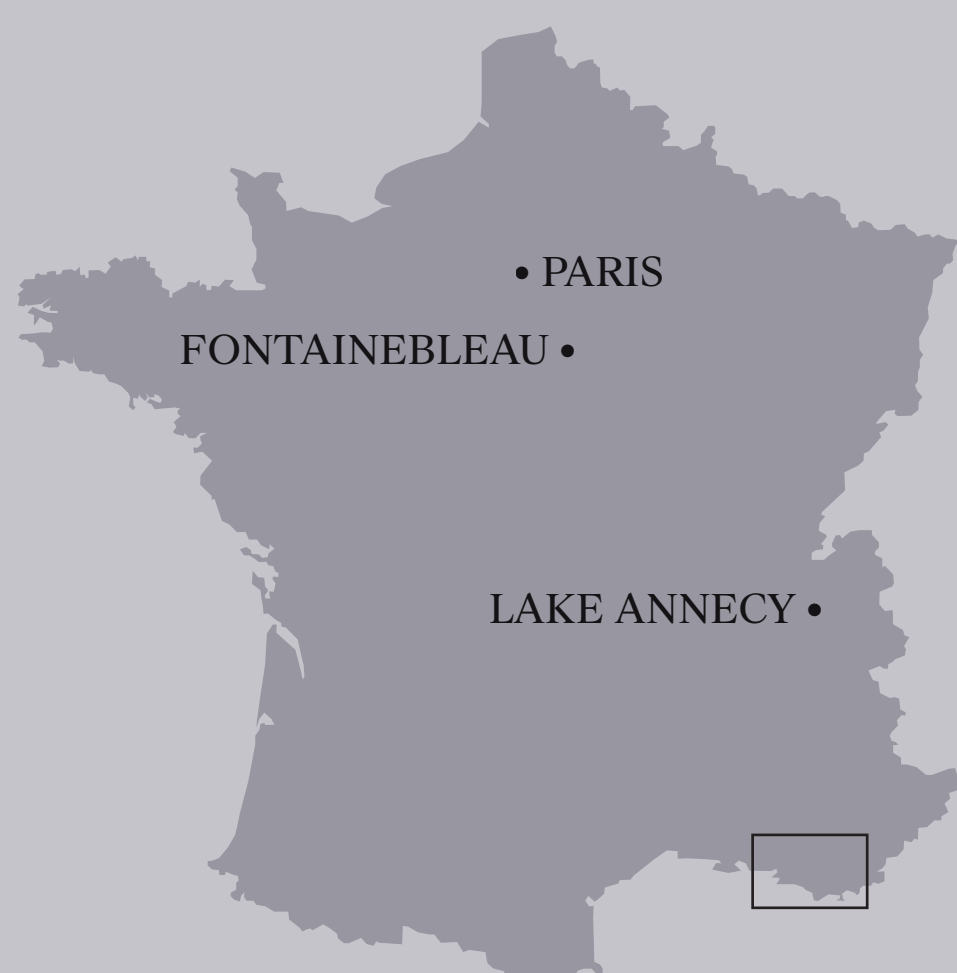
“Time and contemplation gradually modify our vision,” Cézanne reflected, “and at last we reach understanding.” Many of the objects in Cézanne’s visual repertory capture this sense of the effects of time, from unmade beds and empty chairs that register the traces of human presence to clocks and skulls that measure the passage of hours or years and offer reminders of mortality. The artist’s intimate depictions of his family—his wife quietly sewing or his young son sleeping—demonstrate a persistent attention to subjects close at hand and attest to a relationship between drawing and domesticity. Such interior studies recur in Cézanne’s works on paper, private moments recorded in a private medium.

LIVING OBJECTS

Cézanne carefully arranged still life compositions in his studio, returning often to the apples, pears, melons, and glass and ceramic vessels that were always available subjects. Vibrant textiles and white cloths cover tables and serve as backdrops, their almost geological formations verging on landscape. What most animates these still lifes, however, are the materials of their making. Fluid itself, watercolor perfectly represents liquid, from the blue and rose denoting water in a carafe, to the deep indigo filling a squat inkpot, to the purple wine in a tall bottle. Likewise, paper equals paper: unpainted areas form the labels on wine and liquor bottles. Usually relegated to a supporting role, paper is the protagonist in Cézanne's still lifes, visible through transparent layers of pigment or left unpainted to convey a table's expanse, porcelain's shine, or enamel's gloss. Whether for compositional or atmospheric ends, this strategy of purposely leaving passages of paper devoid of pigment—sometimes called “unfinish”—is fundamental to Cézanne's approach.

SCENES OFFERED BY NATURE

“The real, prodigious study to undertake,” Cézanne wrote, “is the diversity of the scene offered by nature.” Painting and drawing outside in the landscape, *en plein air*, the artist examined this diversity through a rigorous process of slow, attentive observation. He spent much of his career in his native Provence, a region that provided a variety of landscape vistas: the symmetrical, tree-lined lanes of his father’s property, the Jas de Bouffan; the winding pathway in the park of the neo-Gothic castle Château Noir; the sedimentary layers in the Bibémus quarry; and the peak of Mont Sainte-Victoire, visible from the window of his final studio. In addition to these long views, he also made close studies of dense foliage, solitary branches, and flowers in pots or vases. The artist rendered the variety of nature with a multiplicity of techniques, conveying greenery through tightly looping pencil lines, layering transparent washes of watercolor to approximate the sensation of reflecting sunlight, or leaving paper blank to express the imposing mass of a mountain.



SITES

1. Chemin des Lauves
2. Les Lauves
3. Bibémus quarry
4. Mont Sainte-Victoire
5. Mont du Cengle
6. Château Noir
7. Jas de Bouffan
8. Trois-Sautets bridge

A CÉZANNE SKETCHBOOK

Cézanne worked in at least nineteen sketchbooks, most of which have been taken apart and dispersed as individual sheets into many different collections. Cézanne used this now unbound but largely intact example over a period of approximately twenty-three years. Rather than filling a single book in order, the artist jumped between sketchbooks, opening each at random and rotating the book as needed, an approach that explains the wide variety of motifs on each page and the mix of vertical and horizontal orientations. There was, however, a rhythm to his practice. Subjects such as portraits, still lifes, and studies of Old Master paintings and sculptures recur, often linked in surprising ways: for example, the twisted stance in a copy of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* is directly related to the posture of the standing male bather that follows. These and other relationships may be detected in this sketchbook, whose pages wind, in order, through the exhibition galleries.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cézanne used his standard materials (pencils, watercolor, sketchbooks, and loose paper) in radically innovative ways, making his process visible. He created a repertory of forms and techniques—a kind of visual grammar—that may be discovered in the works in this gallery and throughout the exhibition.

PENCIL

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Detail of *Madame Cézanne* (c. 1884–87), showing pencil hatching and cross-hatching

Detail of *Group of Male Bathers* (c. 1880), showing looped and spiraling pencil marks

Detail of *Standing Bather* (1879–82), showing repeating and fragmented pencil lines

Cézanne’s favored drawing tool was a medium-soft graphite pencil, used alone or with watercolor. By varying his pressure or building up layers, he was able to produce a range of tones, and rather than erasing, he incorporated mistakes and corrections into his compositions. He used repeated parallel or perpendicular strokes—hatching and cross-hatching—to model surfaces and create a sense of volume, especially in drawings made from direct observation. Whether working from memory or from life, Cézanne employed dense scribbles to indicate shadow, loops and spirals for foliage, and fragmented strokes in place of a single contour, suggesting the many possibilities of line.

WATERCOLOR

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Detail of *Foliage* (1900–04), showing layers of defined brushstrokes with ridges of pigment at their edges

Detail of *Foliage* (1900–04), showing pencil applied over layers of watercolor

Detail of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1902–06), showing fragmented blue lines

Watercolor’s luminosity is dependent on the sheet on which it is painted, its brilliance a balance between transparent pigment and the bright paper seen through. In his earliest experiments, Cézanne worked much as he did in his oil painting, applying the watercolor densely, filling in underlying pencil outlines, covering the paper completely, and highlighting with white gouache. Later he thinned his watercolor and laid down veils of color, incorporating blank paper for highlights. He often applied watercolor to dry, semi-absorbent paper, creating layers of crisply defined brushstrokes with ridges of pigment at their edges. Sometimes he overlapped brushstrokes in quick succession, generating gradations of color as the pigments swirled together. He achieved the jewel-like tones in his late watercolors by allowing each individual patch of color to dry before adding another, producing an effect that one of his contemporaries, the artist Émile Bernard, described as akin to translucent “screens.” In his mature compositions, Cézanne applied pencil marks under, between, and over layers of paint. He used the pointed tip of the paintbrush to draw, describing objects with wavy blue and red strokes. Sensitive to light, watercolor must be kept under low illumination (like that in these galleries) to prevent discoloration.

PAPER

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Detail of *Still Life with Carafe, Bottle, and Fruit* (1906), showing blank paper representing the label on a wine bottle

Detail of *The Bridge at Gardanne* (1885–86), showing the ribbed texture of laid paper

Detail of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1902–06), showing the impressed watermark

Whether as a partner in creating the luminosity of watercolor or left untouched to represent a bright spot or an element in a composition, paper is a central protagonist in Cézanne’s drawing. Cézanne drew in sketchbooks and on loose sheets, using smooth and uniform paper (called “wove”) and paper with a textured, ribbed surface (called “laid”). Early in his career, he sometimes drew on small fragments of paper, and he occasionally repurposed prints or pages from books or magazines. He often drew on both sides of the sheet, at times returning to a page months or years later. As his technique developed, Cézanne became more attuned to the physical qualities of paper—its color, texture, thickness, and absorbency—and to the effects of these qualities on pencil or watercolor. His mature watercolors were primarily executed on semi-absorbent wove paper produced by the French manufacturer Canson and Montgolfier, as identified by its watermarks. Cézanne frequently divided the sheets he purchased in half or in quarters to extend his supply and create more portable sizes.

FROM STUDY SHEETS TO COMPOSITE CANVASES

Cézanne often explored multiple subjects on a single piece of paper (as in the study sheets on view earlier in the exhibition). Sometimes these sheets were later cut apart: the drawings of a skull and a woman taken by surprise, on view nearby, originally shared a page. Close study of Cézanne's paintings has revealed that he also explored multiple subjects on a single canvas. Cézanne's gallerist Ambroise Vollard reported that the artist habitually made canvases with "several little studies of various subjects," which he left with his paint supplier, Julien Tanguy, to cut up for collectors. "One might have seen Tanguy," Vollard wrote, "scissors in hand, disposing of tiny 'motifs,' while some poor *Mycaenas* paid him a louis and marched off with three *Apples*!" Visual examination suggests that each pair of paintings here originally shared a support. Further analysis and art-historical research are being conducted while the works are at MoMA to confirm these relationships and help deepen our understanding of this aspect of Cézanne's practice.