MODERN ART
PRACTICES AND DEBATES

Modernity and Modernism
French Painting in the Nineteenth Century

Francis Frascina Nigel Blake Briony Fer
Tamar Garb Charles Harrison

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CHAPTER 2
IMPRESSIONISM, MODERNISM AND ORIGINALITY

by Charles Harrison

Introduction

This chapter will be principally concerned with the style of art known as Impressionism, and with developments in French painting which ensued during the 1880s and 1890s. The paintings of the Impressionists are generally popular and well known. This is more than can be said for many other typical works of modern art. Yet the paintings we shall be considering have played a particularly important part in the formation of various notions and theories of modernism in art. In the process of discussing them we shall be concerned

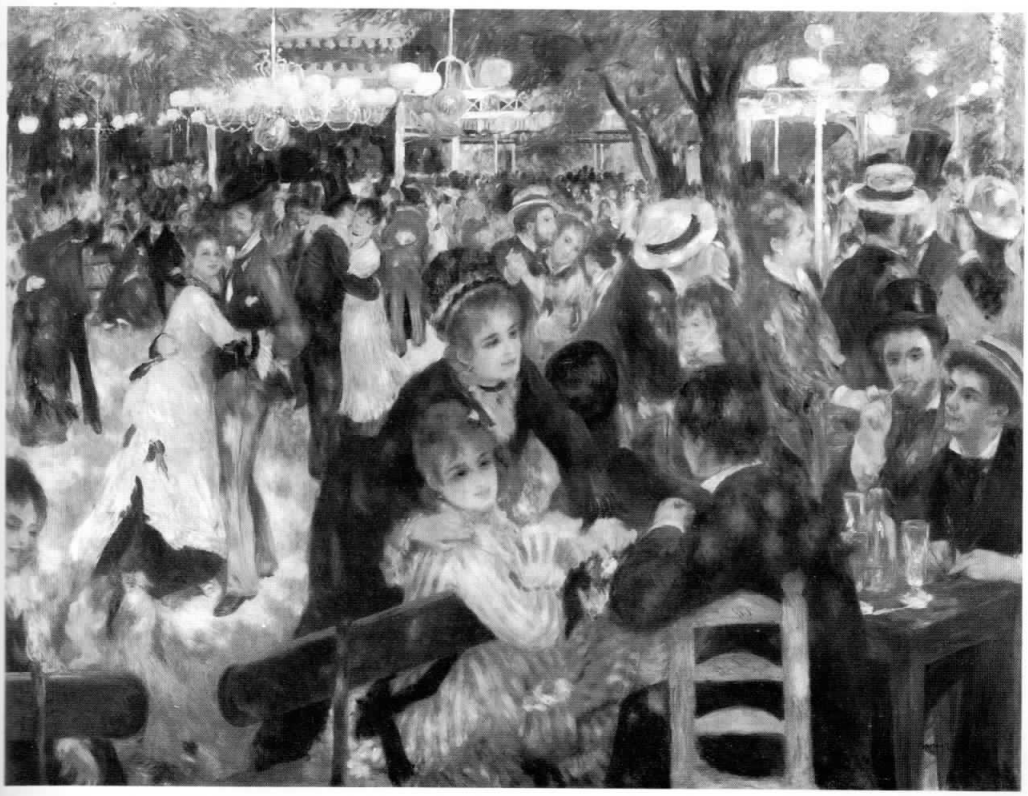

Plate 132 Auguste Renoir, *Bal au Moulin de la Galette* (*Ball at the Moulin de la Galette*), 1876, oil on canvas, 131 x 175 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

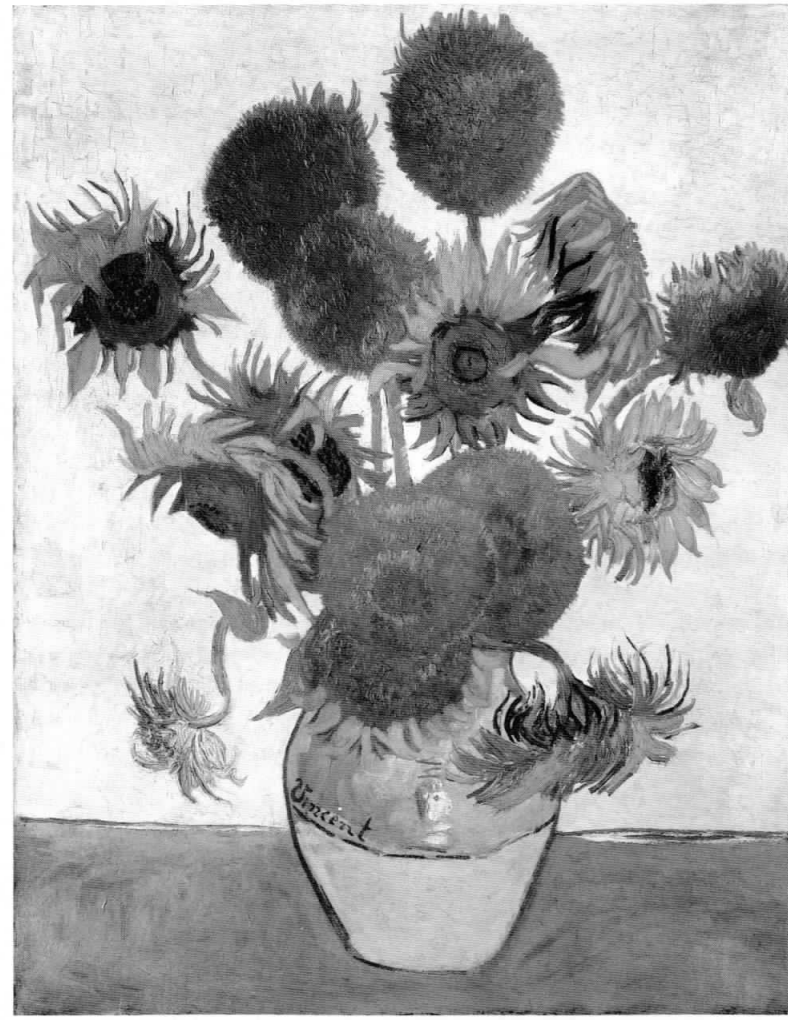

Plate 133 Vincent Van Gogh, *Sunflowers*, 1888, oil on canvas, 166 x 242 cm. The National Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees.

less with the history of modern art as such than with the development of a certain set of critical values, those generally referred to as 'Modernist'. It does not follow, however, that the paintings themselves will be treated as objects of secondary interest. On the contrary, to ask whether the properties and qualities ascribed to a work of art are actually discernible in it is to make that work the specific focus of an open inquiry. For what we mean by the term 'works of art' are not necessarily things that we can simply see and know 'for themselves' or 'in themselves'. Rather they are present to us in a world of ideas, theories, values and beliefs, and are inseparable from those.

In fact, I suspect that there will be very few people reading these words who have not *already* been exposed to relevant judgements and interpretations in some form. I mean that most readers of texts like this one are likely, at the very least, to have read about the high prices paid at auction for Impressionist and 'Post-Impressionist' paintings, to have absorbed reports of Van Gogh's madness or Cézanne's obsessiveness, and to have acquired views, however uninformed, on Renoir's pictures of women, and that even these are forms of exposure to judgements and interpretations; I also mean that the values placed upon these artists and their works over the course of a century have had consequences within a wider field of attitudes and beliefs. Monet's paintings of sunlight on water (Plates 155,

Plate 134 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, *c.*1886–88, oil on canvas, 66 x 90 cm. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London. Reproduced by permission of the Home House Trustees.

156) and Renoir's Parisian women (Plates 132 and 154) have each furnished powerful models of delight and picturesqueness in the modern experience of the visual world.

These are values we may tend to take for granted. Yet the values and meanings we take for granted can be the hardest to examine critically. The supposedly 'innocent' or untheorized view is likely to be one in which certain stereotypes are reproduced as if they were the fruit of 'direct' and 'personal' experience – one that claims, for example, to find Van Gogh's 'madness' in his agitated brushwork (Plate 133) and Cézanne's obsessiveness in his repeated views of the same landscape subjects (Plates 134 and 135). French painting of the late nineteenth century has been a particularly fertile breeding-ground for the myths of modern art. The way to achieve some independence from these myths and stereotypes is not to avoid exposure to the accumulation of judgements and interpretations, since a state of complete insulation is impossible, but to acknowledge the ways in which the accumulation itself may condition the experience of the work. Once we have a conscious sense of that accumulation we can try to see through it, in both senses of seeing through: we can look at the art in the ways that established forms of judgement and interpretation suggest that we should, and we can also expose those judgements and interpretations themselves to scrutiny, the better to perceive the ways in which they may be partial or otherwise fallible. In what follows, I shall consider some of the circumstances under which the image of modern art was formed and developed in criticism and will examine some of the assumptions associated with that image. Taking the first exhibition of the Impressionists as a starting point, I shall try to trace a series of pathways into the art-critical and art-historical issues of the twentieth century, using as principal material for discussion the work of four of the original exhibitions.

Plate 135 Paul Cézanne, *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire*, 1904–6, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 cm. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum Basel Inv. G.1955.12.

Impression and Impressionism

In the 1870s the concept of art as 'impression' was associated with a 'modern' recognition of the inescapably subjective aspects of perception and experience. It was also associated with those stylistic characteristics in painting through which a personal and spontaneous vision was supposed to be expressed. An 'impressionist' in this sense was one in whose work a certain informality of technique appeared to reveal a vision of the natural world which was both instantaneous and individual. The label became associated with a specific movement in 1874, when it was applied to a group of artists showing together as 'independents' – that's to say showing independently of the official Salon. Though the label was used by some writers to deride the artists,[1] there were those, like Jules Castagnary, who employed it to signal a sympathetic understanding of the work on show:

> What quick intelligence of the object and what amusing brushwork! True, it is summary, but how just the indications are! ... The common concept which unites them as a group and gives them a collective strength in the midst of our disaggregate epoch is the determination not to search for a smooth execution, to be satisfied with a certain general aspect. Once the impression is captured, they declare their role terminated ... If one wants

[1] Notably by Louis Leroy in a now notorious review published in *Le Charivari*, 25 April 1874.

> to characterize them with a single word that explains their efforts, one would have to create the new term of *Impressionists*. They are impressionists in the sense that they render not a landscape but the sensation produced by a landscape.
>
> (*Le Siècle*, 29 April 1874, as translated in L. Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, pp.329–30)

The exhibition in question – the first exhibition of the newly-formed 'Société anonyme des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs, etc.,' – has come to be known as the 'First Impressionist Exhibition', although the group did not formally adopt the name for themselves until their third exhibition, in 1877. It has also been celebrated in modern art history as the moment of self-conscious establishment of an avant-garde – 'the touchstone for all such future Modernists' efforts' (P. Tucker, 'The first exhibition in context', p.93). Given that avant-gardism is traditionally associated with a hostile critical reception, it should be stressed that by the early 1870s dissent from the decorum of the official Salon was well established among writers like Castagnary, Ernest Chesneau and Émile Zola, whose interests had been aroused by the Realism of Courbet, by the naturalism of the Barbizon painters, or by the 'modernity' of Manet. By 1874, all but the most conservative critics were aware that the criteria of finish prevailing at the Salon – for instance, the 'smooth execution' mentioned by Castagnary – were tending to stultify the development of painting. Independence and originality had come to be accorded dominant positions in the hierarchy of progressive critical concepts, and interested writers looked for signs of these qualities in those techniques that suggested directness of observation and spontaneity of expression.

Plate 136 Claude Monet, *Impression, soleil levant* (*Impression, Sunrise*), 1872, oil on canvas, 50 x 62 cm. Musée Marmottan, Paris. Photo: Routhier/Studio Lourmel. (Exhibited in the first Impressionist exhibition, 1874.)

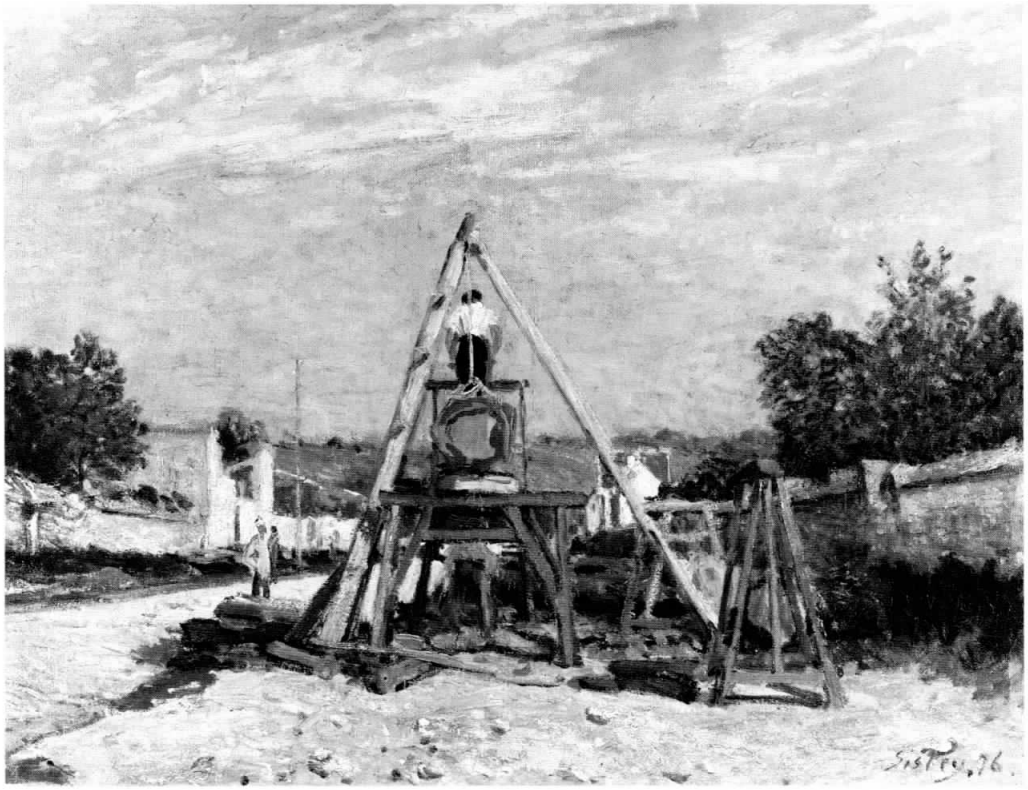

Plate 137 Alfred Sisley, *Scieurs de long* (*Pit Sawyers*), 1876, oil on canvas, 50 x 65 cm. Petit Palais, Paris. Photo: Pierrain, Musées de la Ville de Paris © SPADEM, Paris 1993, DACS, London 1993. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

By the mid-1870s a network of connections had developed between the notions of avant-gardism, technical improvization, modernity and originality. Castagnary, a champion of Realism in the 1860s, believed that painting was 'a part of the social consciousness', but he also believed that some people 'saw' more clearly than others: the true artist was someone in close touch with nature and more immediately responsive to sensation than the majority of people. To be 'original' was to offer a (relatively) faithful representation of the material origins of perception and experience in the actual world. It was a small step from this position to the view that to be 'original' was to be able to perceive, to face and to show 'truths' hidden from or disregarded by contemporary society at large. Fidelity to the authentic and subjective impression thus came to be viewed not only as a measure of the 'originality' of the avant-garde artists, but also as a condition of their modernity.

The exhibition that Castagnary was discussing included all those artists who have consistently and uncontroversially been associated with the development of an 'Impressionist' style in the late 1860s and early 1870s: Claude Monet (Plate 136), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (Plate 132), Camille Pissarro (Plate 149), and Alfred Sisley (Plate 137). It also included artists of established importance in the history of modern art whose work is less securely identified with Impressionism as a specific painterly style: Edgar Degas (Plate 138) and Berthe Morisot (Plate 139) – both of whom showed in seven of the eight group exhibitions – and Paul Cézanne who showed in two of the first three. (Renoir and Sisley showed in four.) By no means all the artists involved were as well-known as these have become. In all, thirty artists were represented in the first exhibition and fifty-five contributed to the group shows at one time or another, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat (Plates

186 and 187) and Odilon Redon (Plate 140) among them. But we now hear comparatively little of Stanislas-Henri Rouart (Plate 141), a wealthy engineer and part-time painter, who showed in as many of the group exhibitions as Degas and Morisot, or of Adolphe-Félix Cals, who showed in the first four (Plate 142), let alone of those who appeared only once, like Auguste de Molins (Plate 143).

With the benefit of hindsight we tend to accept that the standards and grounds of selection by which Salon exhibitions were regulated in the later nineteenth century were such as to make the virtues of the most technically adventurous Impressionist painting unrecognizable or inadmissible as such, but it would be a ludicrous over-simplification to suggest that only conservative and retrograde art was shown at the Salon, while all that was shown in the independent exhibitions was progressive and of abiding quality. Nor can we say that all those who dissociated themselves from the Salon were necessarily distinguished in terms of the quality of their work. While the historical emergence of the avant-garde was certainly associated both with the increasing conservatism of the Salon and with the critical distinctness of the more 'modern' work, that distinctness – or quality – cannot be defined *simply* by contrast with the run-of-the-mill offerings of the Salon. The idea of an independent exhibition was clearly also attractive to some relatively conservative artists who were accustomed to seeing their work admitted to the Salon. So the desire for independent exposure was not simply a consequence of exclusion on stylistic grounds. Apart from anything else, though many of the Impressionist exhibitions were relatively substantial (165 works in the first, 250 in the second, the rest falling between these totals) they were a fraction of the size of the Salons, in which smaller works in particular were likely to go unnoticed unless they were identified with established names. It also needs to be borne in mind that the great majority of the wider Impressionist group – and some of those most often celebrated as 'moderns' – continued to seek admission to the Salon during the 1870s and 1880s, and for the most part with some reward. This was a

Plate 138 Edgar Degas, *Blanchisseuse, silhouette* (*Laundress, Silhouette*), known as *A Woman Ironing*, *c.*1874, oil on canvas, 54 x 39 cm. All Rights Reserved. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; bequest of Mrs H.O. Havemeyer, 1929, the H.O. Havemeyer Collection (29.100.46). (Exhibited in the second Impressionist exhibition, 1876.)

Plate 139 Berthe Morisot, *Cache-cache* (*Hide and Seek*), 1873, oil on canvas, 45 x 55 cm. Collection of Mrs John Hay Whitney, New York. (Exhibited in the first Impressionist exhibition, 1874.)

matter over which the Impressionists themselves were divided. Renoir in particular was assiduous in pursuit of success in the Salon, while Pissarro kept aloof. Clearly the desire for independence was not straightforwardly a matter of principle – or rather, in so far as it *was* a matter of principle, the principle was not one to which all members subscribed. Nor were the Impressionists the only artists to collaborate on exhibitions outside the Salon in the 1870s and 1880s.

Impressionism and art history

To talk about 'Impressionism', as I have suggested, is inevitably to raise questions about the grounds on which canonical status is accorded in modern art. In talking of the Impressionists as a group we tend to refer to many more contributing individuals than those whose work is normally used to define an Impressionist style. In what terms, then, have the latter been singled out? What is it that qualifies Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and Sisley as the definitive representatives of Impressionism? If the answer is that their work is joined by common features not present in the work of others, could we not object that a richer and less exclusive understanding of the style might be achieved by taking into account the work of Degas, or Morisot, or Cézanne, or of Rouart, or Cals, or de Molins? And does this objection itself have the same meaning or weight in the case of Degas (a 'major' artist whose work is on the whole technically dissimilar to that of Monet or Pissarro), as it does in the case of, say, Cals (a 'minor' artist whose exhibited work looked stylistically like some of Monet's or Pissarro's)? Questions like these invite us to consider to what ends the concept of Impressionism has been used by critics and art historians, i.e. what forms of art have been singled out and why?

For some while the prevailing tendency of art-historical work has been to restore some complexity to terms such as Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, both by re-examining the practical and historical contexts in which such terms achieved currency, and by generating awareness of those wider prejudices and mechanisms of exclusion in which art history is liable to be implicated. 'Women Impressionists' and 'Forgotten

Plate 140 Odilon Redon, *Profil de Femme* (*Profile of a Woman*), known as *Profil de Lumière*, 1886, pastel, 34 x 24 cm. Petit-Palais, Paris. Photo: Pierrain, Musées de la Ville de Paris © SPADEM, Paris 1993, DACS, London 1992. (Exhibited in the eighth Impressionist exhibition, 1886.)

Impressionists' have featured among the topics of recent art-historical study and publication. One aim of such studies has been to correct the normal tendency to concentrate upon a limited canon of supposedly 'major' figures. The concept of 'originality', on the other hand, has been powerfully associated with the formation of a modern artistic canon and it has been art-historically out of favour for a while. Clearly, when employed as an evaluative term, it can be used as a means to restrict the canon, and by implication to disparage those deemed followers or late-comers. In this chapter, I aim to encourage a self-critical awareness about the ends to which evaluative terms are used, but it is not a primary objective that the chapter should offer a revision of the established art-historical canon. Rather I mean to discuss some thoroughly canonical examples of Impressionist and of 'Post-Impressionist' painting and to inquire into the art-historical and art-critical grounds of their supposed originality, modernity and quality. We shall be concentrating upon aspects of the work of Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne, with some discussion of the work of Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Camille Pissarro. We shall also look at some paintings from the 1880s which treat of explicitly human and social themes.

Monet and Renoir figure centrally in all accounts of the Impressionist movement. Monet was closely involved in the setting-up of the independent group and he showed in the first four exhibitions and in the seventh. His *Impression, Sunrise* (Plate 136), shown in the first group exhibition, appears to have played a significant part in establishing the movement's public identity. Renoir was also important in the group's inception, and much of its early critical support followed from his friendship with the writer Georges Rivière. He showed in the first three exhibitions, and was included in the seventh, but he remained ambitious for exposure in the Salon and his commitment to the group waned as he acquired wealthy patrons.

Plate 141 Stanislas-Henri Rouart, *Melun* or *La terrasse au bord de la Seine à Melun* (*The Terrace beside the Seine at Melun*), *c.*1880, oil on canvas, 46 x 65 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. (Exhibited in the fifth Impressionist exhibition, 1880.)

Plate 142 Adolphe-Félix Cals, *Paysage à Saint-Siméon* (*Landscape at Saint-Siméon*), known as *Landscape with figures*, 1876, oil on canvas. The John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877).

Plate 143. Auguste de Molins, *The Coming Storm*, 1874, oil on canvas, 35 x 55 cm. Private collection, Lausanne. (Exhibited in the first Impressionist exhibition, 1874.)

Pissarro was the only artist to show in all eight of the group exhibitions. He also helped to establish the style which gave Impressionism its name, and was subsequently closely involved with younger artists, Cézanne and Gauguin among them, for whom Impressionism was a significant transitional phase.

Cézanne showed only in the first exhibition and in the third. A dominant critical tradition has tended to represent him as the most important of the Post-Impressionists. This designation is not one used by the artists concerned – it was coined in 1910 on the occasion of an exhibition of 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists', organized by Roger Fry in London, and has been much used since then. The implication of the term is that the true current of Modernist development flowed directly from Manet to Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, bypassing the Impressionists, and thus that Cézanne's work represents a stage of development in modern art *beyond* that with which Monet is associated, though Monet died twenty years after Cézanne, in 1926. To the American writer Sheldon Cheney, for example, Monet's Impressionism was 'typical of the last phase of realism', whereas Cézanne 'put an end to the four-centuries reign of imitativeness in painting' (*A Primer of Modern Art*, p.80). Cheney's *A Primer of Modern Art* was first published in 1924. By the time of its revision in 1939 it had already received ten printings, which suggests that it was an accepted and influential text among those interested in modern art. The point I mean to stress is that to consider the work of these artists is also to consider how the image of a modern art was formed by reference to late nineteenth-century French painting, and how this image has developed in the West over the past century. Before going any further, therefore, I would like to examine one specific moment in the formation of that image: a moment explicitly associated with the work of Cézanne, or, to be precise, with a certain *critical response* to his work.