
"Mulberry Tree" and "Chestnut Trees": Post-Impressionism in the 19th Century

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By the 1880s, the beginnings of Post-Impressionism were developing in western Europe, and its techniques and methodology were gaining ground. Advanced by artists such as Paul Gauguin and Georges Seurat, the movement began as both an extension and rejection of impressionist tendencies. Two artists, Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh, created highly influential work during this period. Cézanne's *Farmhouse and Chestnut Trees at the Jas de Bouffan* and van Gogh's *Mulberry Tree*, painted in 1885 and 1889 respectively, display the many different forms that Post-Impressionist art could take. Although the works differ in their stylistic trends, their nuanced methods reflect a similar way of viewing the musicality of the world, and display an intimate familiarity with the spectrum of human emotion.

It is important to establish the context of these works in order to effectively examine them. Initially, Impressionism focused narrowly on the mechanical techniques of painting and capturing the fleeting moments of changing light and form. For example, during this period, Baudelaire said that the role of the artist is to paint "the passing moment". However, on the whole, Post-Impressionists disagreed with this dictum; van Gogh himself said that he worked to paint eternity. Post-Impressionists continued using vivid colors by mixing them optically, and worked with daily-life subject matter. As opposed to earlier emphasis on the subject, they instead used symbolist forms to infuse their paintings with emotion and vitality, and focused on a subjective, interpreted view, full of memories and emotions, to connect with the viewer.

One Post-Impressionist piece that highlights these differences is Cézanne's *Farmhouse and Chestnut Trees at the Jas de Bouffan*. It features a farmhouse, part of Cézanne's home *Jas de Bouffan*, framed by chestnut trees. Like many Post-Impressionists, Cézanne wanted to convey not the exact subject, but the sensations the subject inspired in him. The entire image is composed of muted organic colors such as greens and yellows; the tree trunks and buildings are artificially simplified to their basic, geometric elements. In addition, he could have chosen to depict the main building, but instead painted the chestnut trees and the modest farmhouse. This would suggest a long familiarity with his estate, and perhaps pride in not just the grand main buildings but also the quieter settings. Thus he invites the observer to a simple yet shockingly intimate view into his connection and sentimentality towards his home. The pigment is so thinly laid in certain places that the canvas shows through, which suggests a transparent and dreamlike quality, especially with the amorphously rendered chestnut branches. The leaves are

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made of short, parallel, and diagonal brushstrokes, implying movement in a distinctly geometric and systematic way. On closer inspection, this sense of order is prevalent throughout the piece. The farmhouse walls and windows have been reduced to their basic shapes. The foliage is simplified, and the trunks are relatively textureless. In fact, the overall painting lacks texture in general. There is limited emphasis on the actual construction of the objects, and more on their general organization and volume, thus pervading the piece with a feeling of calmness and structure.

Paradoxically, this same reductionist painting style simultaneously inspires isolation. The landscape is balanced, yet uninhabited. There are no signs of life, no laundry hanging from the windows or tools in the yard; there is nothing, in fact, to indicate that anyone lives in the building or has walked down well-worn paths. Whatever Cézanne was experiencing during this period of life, he manages to portray the duality of comfort and familiarity versus isolation. Such conflicting emotions are evident in his delicate balance of simplified lines and muted colors. He gives the inherent turmoil of nature and the soul an outwardly serene appearance. His bittersweet feelings temper how he portrays the reality of the scene in a way that would be recognizable to many viewers. His landscape goes further than just capturing the here and now of the moment that naturalism strives for; he has painted the full expression of emotions, a landscape transfused with his personality, through a delicate yet ambiguous depiction of his home.

A second yet no less important work of Post-Impressionist art is Vincent van Gogh's *Mulberry Tree*. Painted only a year before a deterioration in his mental health and his eventual death, it is easy to see remnants of confusion amidst the energetic autumnal swirls. The painting depicts a solitary mulberry tree on a mountainside. The entire image is a study in contrasts. First, van Gogh paints the ground in pale colors with short, abbreviated strokes, which bracket a long and sinuous trunk of dark brown and green. However, the leaves of the tree take up most of the canvas. Rendered in brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows, they are tendrils that curl, spread, grasp, and seek. Interspersed with coils of brown and black branches, the mulberry tree appears to be aflame. Van Gogh juxtaposes this chaos nicely against the calming backdrop of a deep cerulean sky, painted with straight diagonal brushstrokes. This dazzling array makes the canvas feel top-heavy, like an explosion. In fact, this is accentuated by the paint itself: the canvas is so thickly covered that it appears like a sculpture, embossed with texture and almost visually forcing itself into a third dimension. The tree has become incarnate, alive only through van Gogh's perception of it.

His distinctive painting technique leads one to question: how could a single tree possibly contain so much emotion? This is exactly how van Gogh took the Post-Impressionist style in his own direction. Just as paint is a medium for creating paintings, the tree becomes a medium for expressing his own emotion. The mulberry tree is a vehicle that allows him to transcend

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physical barriers to bare his innermost thoughts. Ultimately, Mulberry Tree highlights similar paradoxes to Cézanne. At first glances, the contrasts are incongruous, even out of place. The leaves' autumnal quality is upbeat and vivacious, but also highlights the fleeting nature of life. Their fire-colored strokes radiate outward, implying movement and growth, but also the turmoil of the swirls trespasses onto the outer, calmer, and colder planes. They are chaos in the midst of confusion, but that chaos is firmly rooted into the ground below. Van Gogh has projected deeply rooted desires and fears onto a reductionist landscape. His preoccupation with the infinite and eternal necessitates a deeper look at the finite, and this image encompasses the conflicts inherent in this exploration. Birth and death, growth and destruction, and faith and sorrow: van Gogh has masterfully projected the sensations and emotions he experiences onto the universal level of nature. In true Post-Impressionist style, the painting has transcended its function as a glimpse into objective reality and provided a way of viewing the artist's own mind and soul.

Comparing the two paintings to each other, however, is not simply a case of vitality versus serenity. As Post-Impressionists, the goal of both artists was to evoke the intimate character behind the easily accessible, visible truth of the scene. Cézanne and van Gogh arranged their compositions in a way that they felt allowed for the most faithfully rendered impression of the subject that would best be conveyed to the viewer. In this sense, they strove to create and communicate the essence of the objects they painted. The difference between these two artists lies in how they approached it.

Most significantly, Mulberry Tree and Chestnut Tree represent the beginning of a divergence in Post-Impressionist style. Cézanne's trend towards simplified and geometric shapes, a result of his desire to evoke objects' essence, can easily be recognized as the precursor to Cubism, which describes the increasingly analytic and abstract approach of artists such as Picasso and Mondrian in the early 20th century. The dominating emotions in Cézanne's image, comfort and isolation, are conveyed using early Cubist techniques that are regulated by order and the optical effects of combining color and brushstroke. Van Gogh, on the other hand, followed an opposing stylistic direction. Although still Post-Impressionist, under no circumstances could one call Mulberry Tree geometric. The textured paint layers, vivid colors, and swirling brushstrokes are all clearly antecedents for Abstract Expressionist art. Rather than merely represent their surroundings, Cézanne and van Gogh chose to rely on the interactions between color and shape to describe their worlds, albeit using two different approaches to achieve this similar goal.

Ultimately, the two paintings create a lasting impression on the viewer of color and complexity. They allow us not only to see an object the way artists saw it, but also to feel how they felt it. Van Gogh succeeded in conveying emotion through varied and contrasting brushstrokes, complementary colors, and uneven balance; Cézanne focused on reductionist techniques and muted colors to portray nostalgia and solitude. They did not objectively record a landscape: they

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synthesized one, focusing on different aspects that allowed for a eternal perpetuation of their sensation of it. Mulberry Tree and Chestnut Trees show varied individualized styles and techniques that Post-Impressionism encompassed, but they both represent the same desire to capture the complexity of emotions and feelings that we experience when viewing the natural world.

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