

**Cézanne and Seurat:  
Two Post-Impressionists Return  
To Form**

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The Post-Impressionist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries continued the rebellion against the classical form and style of painting. Whereas the Impressionists had used the properties of light to dissolve the form of their subjects, blurring the details and leaving the viewer with only an “impression” of the image, the Post-Impressionists felt that the Impressionists had overdone this dissolution. They restored form and detail to their paintings by focusing on color rather than light, but in unusual, non-traditional ways rather than reverting to the classical styles of past eras.

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Georges Seurat (1851-1891) represent two different aspects of Post-Impressionism in their approaches to color and form. Both show evidence of Impressionist influence in their bold use of color, though it is hard to envision a more dramatic contrast than that between Cézanne’s thick, heavy blocks and Seurat’s pointillist dots. Both artists additionally exhibit a Post-Impressionist return to an emphasis on form, just in different ways.

In Cézanne’s work, we see carefully drawn black outlines surrounding patches of color. The color is thickly applied using short, choppy brushstrokes, with the texture of the strokes emphasizing the blockiness of the color. Particularly in *Still Life with Apples* (c. 1875-1877), Cézanne’s view of the world as nothing more than geometric shapes is evident. The spherical apples are colored with rectangular strokes of color carefully arranged in parallel rows, each brushstroke clearly visible upon close viewing. Interestingly, from a close-up view this method of applying color makes the apples look, not like apples, but like rather self-conscious *paintings* of apples.

A slightly different approach can be seen in Cézanne’s *The Great Bathers* (1898-1905). The brushstrokes are still clear, used to explicitly delineate color, but the

arrangement is more random, less rectangular. In the background, the blocks of color of tree, sky, and cloud blend to the point that, though it is clear that all three are present, it is hard to tell exactly where one ends and another begins. The figures themselves are clearly outlined, though details of bodies and faces inside those outlines are obscured by the patchiness of the paint. The viewer is thus left knowing that the figures are present, but with only impressions of the features of the individual figures themselves.

Seurat, on the other hand, delineates his forms not necessarily with black outlines, but with high contrast in color. By placing two contrasting colors side by side, both colors are heightened in the viewer's eyes. This is clearly demonstrated in Seurat's most important work, *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-86). The figures stand out from the background and are separated from one another, not because of line, but because of color. On the other hand, Seurat's figures look blocky and almost caricature-like thanks to the high-contrast technique he employed.

With color, both artists are playing tricks on the viewer's eyes, but in different ways. In both cases, a viewer standing at a distance will see a blending of colors, a blurring and melding of harsh edges into a smoothed surface. The blending is merely optical, however, and once the viewer gets up close to the surface of the painting, the color mixing disappears and the viewer sees individual colors holding their own. Cézanne's blocks and Seurat's dots have thus fooled the eye into thinking that mixing pigment, not mixing reflected light, has produced the color seen.

Cézanne and Seurat show interesting differences, from each other and from the traditional, in their treatment of perspective. Though both artists show that they are aware of distance and its classical treatment using linear perspective, both distort it in their own

way. In Cézanne's *The Great Bathers*, the image is flattened to the picture plane, though not completely. Even though it is clear from the arrangement of the bathers that some should be physically located in front of others, they are painted in such a way that the depth of the grouping is lost. The trees block much of the background, while the intermixing of sky and tree in the upper part of the painting distorts the depth perception in this area.

Seurat, on the other hand, is clearly aware of volume and linear perspective in *La Grande Jatte*. The strong diagonal line of the riverbank draws the viewer's eye into the distance, while images and figures clearly become smaller as they recede into that background. However, though the overall composition treats perspective classically, the details tell a different story. Seurat's figures, both the people and the trees, are very flat and two-dimensional, lacking the subtle shadings to round them out into three-dimensionality thanks to his treatment of color. His foreground figures show little detail – only the one man in the foreground, reclining in his sleeveless shirt smoking a pipe, has clearly distinguishable facial features. The rest of the figures are faceless, featureless, cardboard cutouts placed atop the island scene. Though the scene as a whole is three-dimensional, the viewer is left with a sense of something not quite right.

With both Cézanne and Seurat, there is a sense of exploration in the use of color, but to delineate form, not dissolve form as did Monet and his contemporaries. Form, shape, and volume have been important artistic components in the past, but were never treated in such innovative and unusual ways by previous artists.