

CÉZANNE'S APPLES



Rainer Maria Rilke and Virginia Woolf both expressed astonishment, the excitement of discovery, and a shock of recognition, upon first seeing the paintings of Paul Cézanne. While Rilke sought a poet's language that would be the equivalent of Cézanne's language of color, Woolf went in search of a fluidity of words to match the flowing intensity of the painter's strokes. Woolf was caught by the innovation and breathless perfection of the first Cézanne she saw, noting in her diary: "There are 6 apples in the Cézanne picture. What can 6 apples *not* be? I began to wonder." Throughout a lifetime of visionary toil, Woolf struggled to write from the place of surprise, spaciousness, and amazement called forth by Cézanne's apples.

In Rilke's *Letters on Cézanne*, we are treated to a spontaneous account of the 1907 Paris exhibition of Cézanne's work, written in the form of letters to his wife. For Rilke, Cézanne transformed apples, those "humble cooking apples ... scattered on a kitchen table," into "pure things." We are told that Cézanne represents a turning point in painting. The turning to a focus on color rather than form. Rilke says of Cézanne that, "no one before him ever demonstrated so clearly the extent to which painting is

something that takes place among the colors;” and he declares that this dialogue among colors is understood by Cézanne as “the whole of painting.” What Rilke finds most compelling is the inner equilibrium of Cézanne’s colors. No color is ever insistent or obtrusive. Instead, there is always “a calm, almost velvetlike air” about a painting. By casting any loud or burning colors into “a listening blue,” Cézanne achieves a silent repose, a self-containment, within each painting. For me, one of the best features of Rilke’s response to Cézanne is his refraction of the color blue. Rilke discovers in Cézanne, not only a “listening blue,” but a “light cloudy bluishness,” a “thunderstorm blue,” and a “densely quilted blue.” *Letters on Cézanne* is a deep meditation on the relationship between poetry and painting in which the holiness of Cézanne’s ability to see “greatly” is revealed. Cézanne, according to Rilke, “has the right eyes” – the eyes a poet as well as a painter needs to make great art. Cézanne challenges poets to see, really see, what is before them, and then to write from that concentrated perception.

Although I hunted mightily, I never found a reproduction of what Woolf refers to as Cézanne’s six apples. After weeks of searching, I came to the conclusion that there were, in fact, seven apples in the painting Woolf saw, and her reference to six apples was a simple misremembering. Then, in an extraordinary moment of synchronicity, I came across an exotic little book titled *Apples and Persimmons: A heavenly discourse between Paul Cézanne and Mu-ch’i on the end of painting*, written by Theodore Bowie. Mu-ch’i, a Zen Buddhist monk from Szechuan, was active from 1200-1255 CE; his painting of *Six Persimmons* is revered by Zen masters to this day. Some believe the six persimmons symbolize the stages of enlightenment; others believe they symbolize the stages of the creative process. In *Apples and Persimmons*, a limited edition book of five pages in

English with another large fold-out page of translated text in French and Chinese, Cézanne and Mu-ch'i meet in Heaven – or Infinity, where parallel minds meet – to discuss painting and the way of the artist. Mu-ch'i objects to the genre label “still-life” as an oxymoron, and rejects even more strongly the French term *nature morte*, for he believes Nature is very much alive and that what a painter catches in a painting is a moment in the ever-changing cycle of life-death-rebirth. If the painter is a great artist, he or she catches Nature in a perfect moment, a moment in which “the painting paints itself” because the painter mystically becomes one with the object he or she is painting. Much like Rilke, who finds a holiness in Cézanne’s ability to see greatly, Mu-ch'i regards Cézanne as a Zen master, an artist who achieves perfection in his paintings because there is no separation between subject and object in them, no separation between painter and apples. Here the number of apples becomes insignificant. What is important is that Cézanne and the apples are One.

The *Letters on Cézanne* and *Apples and Persimmons* are inspiring documents. After reading them and reflecting on Woolf’s astonishment over Cézanne’s apples, one may begin to look at paintings and poetry, and life itself, differently. To look, really look, is to combine seeing with thought, and that is no small accomplishment.

Letters on Cézanne

By Rainer Maria Rilke

Edited by Clara Rilke. Translated by Joel Agee.

112 pages. North Point Press. 2002

*Apples and Persimmons: A heavenly discourse between Paul Cézanne and Mu-ch'i on
the ends of painting*

By Theodore Bowie

Indiana University Art Museum publication. Limited Edition (1050). 1966

By the Book column published in *Dan's Papers* June 19, 2009