

Paul Cézanne

LANDSCAPE

The Bay from L'Estaque

c. 1886 (130 Kb); Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 38 1/2 in; The Art Institute of Chicago
A favored high view, the landscape gave Cézanne a command of vast space with elements of grandiose span and force; buildings, water, mountains, and sky follow in alternating movement and repose, projection and calm surface. Without paths or human figures, the world is spread out before his eyes, a theme for pure looking; it invites no action, only discernment; it is sunny, but not gay or cheerful--a balance of warmth and coolness, the momentary and the timeless, the stirring and the stable, in perfect harmony and fullness.



The painting lives through the power of great contrasts: the luminous, richly broken field of reds, oranges, and greens against the blue sea; the modeled wavy mountains, convex, against the filmy, substanceless sky. These mountains have a human, or at least organic, quality--sleeping limbs at rest upon the earth--opposed to the rigid architecture below. The broad strata of the landscape are interlocked pairs, forming larger rectangular zones which become more cohesive still through the horizontals in the diagonal fields and the sloping forms in the horizontal. An ever-active touch, responding to the lie or swerve or rise of objects, unites this extended world from point to point. Nothing is perfectly still; the dark water has its pulsations and nuanced mood, and the pure sky, a delicate quivering of ethereal tones.

Below, a great block of a building breaks the alignment of the buildings beside it and the banding of earth, sky, and distant mountains. Parallel to the ascending shoreline, it looks to the puff of smoke and the highest mountain and induces an undrawn diagonal between them across the sea. But mountain and smoke are parallel to the major rooflines of this building--these are directed like the slope of the shore and re-enforced by the unique cast shadow of the chimney. Following these lines, each of another color, we come upon the finesse of the far-offjetty pointing to the puff of smoke along the same inclined axis, and below this jetty we discover the little red house on the shore and the high chimney--a mysterious unstressed grouping of isolated elements which take their places in the harmony of the whole. The chimney is an object for wondering contemplation, so beautifully wedded it is, in its multiple character, to the forms and colors of the whole--rising from light warm to dark cool, re-enacting the contrast of earth and sea, ending at a level where an inlet dovetails the line of water and land, opposing and uniting the strong horizontals of roofs and ground, and focusing the play of scattered verticals by its culminating form.

A marvelous peace and strength emanate from this work--the true feeling of the Mediterranean, the joy of an ancient nature which man has known how to sustain through the simplicity of his own constructions.