

It Started With Cézanne

Montclair Art Museum's groundbreaking exhibition is 10 years in the making

By PEGGY MCGLONE

French master Paul Cézanne is renowned for ground-breaking work that put the European art world on the road to modernism. A new exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum shows how many American artists went along for the ride.

In the most ambitious exhibition in its 95-year history, the Montclair Art Museum presents "Cézanne and American Modernism," an exploration of Cézanne's influence on American artists at the start of the 20th century and their efforts to establish his reputation as the critical link between the Impressionists and the modern art movement.

Almost every gallery of the museum will be reconfigured for



the exhibition, which opens Sept. 13 and runs through Jan. 3, 2010. The show features 131 works, including 18 by the European master, as well as paintings, watercolors and photographs representing 34 American artists. It will hang in the galleries that usually house the museum's permanent collection, while the smaller, temporary galleries will display a new, abbreviated installation of the museum's collections.

"Cézanne and American Modernism" focuses on the first three decades of the 20th century, from Cézanne's death in 1906 through 1930, as it details his influence on the next generation of American artists and how they helped cement his reputation

as the father of modern art.

"American artists were playing a lot of different roles in spreading the influence of Cézanne, not only in their work but the way they proselytized ... spread the word, the gospel of Cézanne," says Gail Stavitsky, the museum's chief curator who organized the show.

The exhibition is a collaboration with the Baltimore Museum of Art, where it will travel after it closes in Montclair. Its final stop will be the Phoenix Art Museum, where it will be on view next year from July 3 through Sept. 26. The show also has a companion catalogue, published in association with Yale University Press, which includes 23 essays that extend the period of Cézanne's influence through the 1960s.

The exhibition represents a series of firsts for the Montclair museum. It is the largest show ever presented, with loans from 60 museums and private collectors, and the first time the institution has partnered with another major museum.

It also represents a first for the intellectual and aesthetic ground it covers, Stavitsky says. For the first time, works by masters of different eras will hang next to each other, emphasizing not only the visual language that passed from Cézanne to Americans such as Morgan Russell and Marsden Hartley, but the broader, historical implications of these links.

"Cézanne was aware of his legacy; he knew he started in a new direction but he was too old to finish it," says Stavitsky, who has been working on the exhibition for a decade. "It's interesting to see how Cézanne liberated artists to find their own way."

An example of the visual influence is found in the comparison of Cézanne's "Five Apples" and a later painting by Russell, "Three Apples," owned by the Museum of Modern Art and loaned for this show. Gertrude and Leo Stein owned the Cézanne work and loaned it to Russell, one of the expatriate American artists who frequented the parties held at their Paris

apartment.

"They have never been shown together before," says Stavitsky. "So here we are, going back in time, recreating a moment in history."

Cézanne's influence was the subject of "Cézanne and Beyond," an exhibition that closed in May after several months at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Although that stand-alone exhibit linked the 19th-century artist to modern artists after him, it mostly focused on later modern and contemporary artists such as Jasper Johns and Ellsworth Kelly, Stavitsky says. Only three artists overlap both exhibitions, she adds, noting that visitors to the Philly show will find new influences and connections in Montclair.

"They were more interested in visual language. We are going more into the narrative, how the story of Cézanne's art was received and how his reputation evolved from isolated artist to father of modern art, saint of modern art," Stavitsky says.

To accommodate anticipated crowds, the museum will extend its gallery hours and will open one night per week for the first time. Hours are Tuesday through Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. and Thursday until 9. The museum will be closed Mondays and major holidays. It will not raise its admission fees, which remain \$12 for adults, \$10 for seniors and students with ID. Admission is free for museum members and children under 12.

After a decade of preparation, Stavitsky is eager to see the works hung and observe visitors as they journey through the exhibition. She hopes they will be engaged in both the history and the art.

"You are always trying to strike that balance, to have a lot of popular appeal, but also advance the history and scholarship of the field," she says. "I hope it works on all those fronts." ☺

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Left: Maurice Prendergast's "Still Life: Fruit and Flowers" (circa 1910-13). Right: Morgan Russell's "Three Apples" (1910).

