



FONDATION BEYELER

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Cézanne

CEZANNE

25 January – 25 May 2026

Cover:

Paul Cezanne

Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves, 1902–1906 (detail)

La Montagne Sainte-Victoire vue des Lauves

Oil on canvas, 65 × 81 cm

Private collection

Photo: Dominic Büttner

INTRODUCTION

This is the first monographic exhibition devoted by the Fondation Beyeler to the French artist Paul Cezanne. Taking as its starting point the seven works held in the Beyeler Collection, the exhibition focusses on the painter's late work. Cezanne, a native of Aix-en-Provence, revolutionised art by laying bare in his pictures the very structures of painting. The manner in which the image is constructed on canvas thus becomes more important than what is being depicted. Cezanne freed art from the tradition of perspective and from a bodily ideal that had remained steeped in Antiquity – a liberation that proved hugely influential and paved the way for abstract, non-representational art.

The exhibition, which brings together 58 oil paintings and 21 watercolours, is organised thematically along the subjects with which Cezanne engaged throughout his life: portraits and group scenes, still lifes and landscapes. One room presents a selection of his delicate, precious watercolours.

At the end of the exhibition, visitors are invited to experiment and work on their own watercolours in our dedicated studio. A short film about Paul Cezanne by contemporary painter Albert Oehlen and filmmaker Oliver Hirschbiegel rounds off the exhibition.

We wish you inspiring encounters with the work of Paul Cezanne!

BIOGRAPHY

Paul Cezanne was born on 19 January 1839 in Aix-en-Provence.* His parents were milliners before his father took over a bank and became very wealthy. One of Paul's classmates was the future celebrated writer Émile Zola.

Cezanne's father wanted him to study law and only reluctantly accepted his son's desire to become an artist.

Beginning in 1861, Cezanne spent lengthy periods of time in Paris. However, he failed to gain admission to the École des Beaux-Arts and only rarely managed to show his work in one of the main annual exhibitions such as the *Salon*.

In the 1860s, he used heavy impasto and a dark palette to paint scenes of violence, murder and abduction, as well as producing cheerful idylls.

For many years, Cezanne lived off the meagre allowance provided by his father. For fear of being disinherited, he initially did not disclose his relationship with Hortense Fiquet, who worked as a bookbinder and a model. In 1872, the couple welcomed their son Paul. They only married in 1886, shortly before the death of the artist's father.

In the 1870s, Cezanne's extensive artistic exchanges with the painter Camille Pissarro led him to develop the bright pictorial style on which his reputation rests to this day.

At first, he found only little support in avant-garde circles and his works were bought mainly by fellow artists such as Paul Gauguin and Edgar Degas.

He gained prominence with a first major exhibition organised in 1895 by the Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard. Having become financially independent through his father's inheritance, he painted experimental, "open" pictures, which attracted the interest of many collectors. In 1901, he had a studio built on a hill above Aix, which can still be visited today. Paul Cezanne died in Aix-en-Provence in 1906.

* The exhibition favours the spelling "Cezanne", used by the artist himself to sign his letters and his works. The spelling with an accent was long used to ensure the name's correct pronunciation. Today, the Société Paul Cezanne in Aix-en-Provence and the artist's descendants are campaigning to revert to the original spelling.

ROOM 1

1 Portrait de l'artiste à la palette, c. 1890

Self-Portrait with Palette

Oil on canvas

Emil Bührle Collection, on long-term loan at the
Kunsthaus Zürich

This self-portrait shows Paul Cezanne in half-figure, standing in front of an easel. His palette is displayed prominently, parallel to the picture plane, like an explicit invitation extended to us by the artist to take part in the act of painting. Cezanne's gaze seems to be moving back and forth between the canvas on the easel and a point outside the painting – most likely a mirror used to study his image. The textures of paint on the palette hint at Cezanne's distinctive painting technique: juxtaposed dabs of colour – he called them “taches” – that only combine into complex chromatic structures in the viewer's eye. We know of around 50 self-portraits dating from all periods of Cezanne's work, among them oil paintings such as this one, as well as drawings and watercolours. They provide an intimate account of Cezanne's personal and artistic maturation.

ROOM 1

2 Les joueurs de cartes, 1892–1896

The Card Players

Oil on canvas

The Courtauld, London

Quietly intent on their game, two card players sit facing each other. The moment depicted here – before the game's first move – appears at once decisive and timeless. We are given a full view of the left-hand figure's cards, but we cannot tell from the painting which game exactly is being played.

The location of the scene is reminiscent of a tavern. Yet the models Paul Cezanne studied for this painting were field labourers on his family's estate Jas de Bouffan in Aix-en-Provence. The proportions of their bodies appear distorted: their heads are too small for their long torsos and their thick legs seem to burst the confines of the table. This painting is one of five in which Cezanne took on the long-established tradition of card playing scenes. All of them were preceded by several portrait studies in oil, watercolour and graphite, which attest to the compositions' meticulous preparation.

ROOM 2

3 Nature morte avec pot et fruits, c. 1890

Still Life with Jug and Fruit

Oil on canvas

Oskar Reinhart Collection “Am Römerholz”, Winterthur

The centre of this most likely unfinished oil painting features a still life with pears, apricots and a milk jug. The white tablecloth, barely suggested, seems to blend into the unpainted surface of the canvas. As viewers, we are thus invited to mentally fill in the blanks in the picture. This principle of *non finito*, “the unfinished”, was already prized in the Renaissance as a masterly means of purposeful suggestion. The fragment was also endowed with high artistic value during the Romantic era. In this view, the unfinished is neither imperfect nor incomplete – rather, it embodies the promise of becoming. It also offers invaluable insights into artists’ perception and work processes.

Paul Cezanne’s ability to formulate a pictorial idea with spontaneous, painterly gestures was admired by many of his fellow artists. In a conversation reported by Maurice Denis, Pierre-Auguste Renoir marvelled: “He can’t put two strokes of colour on a canvas without it already being very good”.

ROOM 2

4 Rideau, cruchon et compotier, 1893/94

Curtain, Jug and Dish of Fruit

Oil on canvas

Kenneth C. Griffin Collection

At first glance, this picture shows a traditional still life with fruit, a jug and a dish on a table. However, on closer examination the table does not seem to follow the rules of perspective representation. The tablecloth's implausible draping appears to defy the laws of gravity. The dish looks about to tip over and many of the fruit would be rolling toward us were they not made of paint on canvas. The finely modelled jug is the only object to convey some sense of stability. Its grey glazing takes up the hues of all the other elements in the picture – as does the background wall, which in itself forms an abstract composition of brushstrokes. Paul Cezanne's painting does not depict reality – rather, it shows the highly deliberate and purposeful deployment of his wide range of painterly means of expression. His tireless sounding of pictorial possibilities can be traced further in the small still life from the Beyeler Collection just to the left, in which the same objects enter new, enigmatic combinations.

ROOM 3

5 Madame Cezanne à la chaise jaune, 1888–1890

Madame Cezanne in a Yellow Chair

Oil on canvas

Beyeler Collection

Paul Cezanne often portrayed the same person several times. His wife Hortense is thus depicted in 29 paintings. Yet Cezanne was less interested in precisely rendering his sitter's individual features than in how to construct the figure and the entire image using only colour. In so doing, he ignored the classical rules of spatial perspective. Given her seated position, Hortense's upper body appears much too close to us. Behind the back of the chair, the wall moulding seems to angle off even though no corner is apparent in the room. Certain parts of the body are finely modelled and detailed, while the face is sketched in mere dabs of colour.

Cezanne frequently worked on a picture for several months. His art dealer Ambroise Vollard, featured in the portrait on the right, had to endure 140 sittings before Cezanne declared himself satisfied with the depiction of his white shirt. The young man in the picture on the left, a model named Michelangelo di Rosa, features in four oil portraits, each displaying a different pose. This celebrated version shows the extent to which a body posture's manifest lack of realism can heighten the emotional impact of a portrait.

ROOM 3

6 Le jardinier Vallier, c. 1906

The Gardener Vallier

Oil on canvas

Tate, London

In this painting, Paul Cezanne portrayed his gardener, Vallier. It shows the old man sitting on the terrace of the studio the artist had himself built in 1901 on the hill of Les Lauves overlooking Aix-en-Provence. Cezanne shared a special relationship with his gardener – Vallier helped him tend to the garden, provided the care required by the artist's diabetic condition, and posed for him on many occasions. Cezanne was working on a portrait of Vallier on the terrace just a few days before his death.

There are nine portraits of Cezanne's gardener. A second version can be seen right next to this painting, and a water-colour study is on display in Room 8. In these portraits, Cezanne does not attempt to precisely render Vallier's facial features. He merges the silhouette with its surroundings and uses the same shades of ochre and blue for the gardener's clothing as for the wall or the sky in the background. Cezanne usually painted his portraits indoors. In this depiction of Vallier, however, he blurred the traditional distinction between the genres of portrait and landscape painting.

ROOM 4

7 Sept baigneurs, c. 1900

Seven Bathers

Oil on canvas

Beyeler Collection

Inspired by his study of Old Masters such as Lucas Cranach the Elder or Titian at the Louvre Museum in Paris, from the 1870s onward Paul Cezanne repeatedly came back to the theme of bathers. The paintings' great diversity in style and composition reflects his enduring interest in finding forms able to evoke a state of natural paradise. In this late, small format from the Beyeler Collection, the group of seven bathers is positioned in the centre of the landscape, which forms a framing oval around the figures. The naked male bodies are sketched with dark blue, discontinuous brushstrokes, their volume modelled with "taches" (stains or dabs) of various hues. At the centre of the picture, serpentine lines echo the contours of the bodies and bring movement to the figures. They can also be read as plants, such as reeds overlapping with the bathing figures. This ambiguity and the painting's apparent incompleteness invite us to ever new discoveries.

ROOM 5

8 Château Noir, 1903/04

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

This picture features an intriguing, stately building, reminiscent of a romantic ruin. Its cubic forms contrast with the thick vegetation in the foreground, rendered with vibrant dabs of colour. The building is the Château Noir (Black Castle), a neo-gothic manor house built on the outskirts of Aix-en-Provence between 1830 and 1860. According to local lore, its original owner had the walls of the unfinished castle painted black, hence its name. However, at the time Paul Cezanne featured the building in five paintings, its façade was ochre-coloured, like the stone extracted from the nearby Bibémus Quarries. Cezanne knew the estate from excursions taken as a young man. From the late 1880s onward, he often went there to paint outdoors. In order to store his painting equipment, he rented a room in the Château Noir, whose lancet windows can be seen in the picture.

ROOM 6

9 La Montagne Sainte-Victoire vue des Lauves, 1902–1906

Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Starting from the lower edge of the picture, our gaze travels along suggested shrubs and trees, then crosses a sunlit plateau all the way to the horizon, where a mountain range rises against a bluish sky: the Montagne Sainte-Victoire, with its rugged limestone bluffs and distinctive summit. In the last years of his life, Paul Cezanne engaged passionately with this mountain, which towers over his hometown of Aix-en-Provence, painting it a total of 87 times from various viewpoints. This painting shows the view from the hill of Les Lauves, on which the artist's studio was located from 1901.

The picture is constructed using rhythmically arranged dabs of colour, with barely a line holding them together. An effect of atmospheric perspective is achieved through the contrast between the foreground's saturated shades of green and ochre and the background's pale blues and pinks. At the same time, the picture's forms and colours come together on the surface of the canvas as a wholly autonomous composition. The landscape appears to exist outside of space and time.

ROOM 6

10 Rochers près des grottes au-dessus du Château Noir, c. 1904

Rocks near the Caves above the Château Noir

Oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The rock face in this painting rises like a wall, blocking the view to the horizon and obscuring a vast portion of the sky. It is framed on the right by a group of trees, whose trunks visually extend the cracks in the rocks. Paul Cezanne was already fascinated by geology as a youth, an interest spurred by his friendship with Antoine-Fortuné Marion (1846–1900), who was to become a geologist and palaeontologist. As Cezanne wrote: “In order to paint a landscape well, I first need to discover its geological foundations”. In this composition, he translates the rock formations into a flat arrangement of numerous dabs of ochre, green, grey and bluish paint. This work is the last in a series of paintings Cezanne carried out toward the end of his life on the estate of Château Noir near Aix-en-Provence. It belonged for a long time to the collection of the artist Henri Matisse, who looked up to Cezanne as a model.

ROOM 7

11 Sous-bois (Chemin du Mas Jolie au Château Noir), 1900–1902

Undergrowth (Path from Mas Jolie to Château Noir)

Oil on canvas

Beyeler Collection

This painting features a forest path bathed in light. Lined with trees, the path ascends stair-like, leading our gaze into the depth of the picture. The nearly symmetrical composition is both peaceful and vibrant: Paul Cezanne's textured brushstrokes form an almost palpable surface structure. The artist uses shades of green, blue and ochre to depict the dense foliage that encloses the path, the light filtering through the trees, and the sky. The canvas, primed with a light colour, is visible in several places, giving the impression that Cezanne succeeded in painting air. The landscape around Montagne Sainte-Victoire, with which Cezanne was so deeply familiar, never ceased to inspire him to new pictorial inventions, as can be seen in the two other, similarly titled paintings displayed on this wall.

ROOM 8

12 La Montagne Sainte-Victoire vue des Lauves, 1902–1906

Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves

Graphite and watercolour on paper

Private collection

One of Paul Cezanne's favoured motifs is depicted here in washes of watercolour: the Montagne Sainte-Victoire, seen from the hill of Les Lauves. The fluidity and transparency of watercolours allowed Cezanne to conceive forms wholly in relation to light. As the application of colour in glazes proceeds from light to dark, white can only be achieved by leaving portions of the canvas unpainted. The colour of the paper thus becomes a key element of design. Watercolour painting therefore calls for a subtle balance between careful observation and spontaneous brushwork.

In a letter written in 1907 to the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, a great admirer and highly insightful connoisseur of Cezanne's work, described his watercolours as "a series of stains, wonderfully arranged and with great mastery of touch: as though mirroring a melody".

ROOM 9

13 Watercolour Studio

Following up on the encounter with Paul Cezanne's work, visitors of all ages are invited to give free rein to their own creativity in our watercolour studio.

Sets of cards provide information on the basic principles of watercolour painting as well as creative impulses.

Depending on their available time and prior knowledge, visitors may freely explore the technique or deepen their individual practice.

Art educators are present to provide support and suggestions. Children up to the age of 12 are welcome in the company of an adult.

Studio opening hours:

Daily 11am to 5pm

Wednesdays also 5pm to 7pm

ROOM 9

14 Film

Cezanne on art, 2025, running time: 18 minutes

The short film *Cezanne on art* by Albert Oehlen and Oliver Hirschbiegel is inspired by conversations between Paul Cezanne and his friend Joachim Gasquet. With Sean O'Brien, Sam Riley and Nichole Galicia in the lead roles, it was shot in the South of France in the foothills of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire and in the Bibémus Quarries. The film thus captures the light and atmosphere of the landscape that exerted such profound influence on Cezanne's painting.

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INFORMATION

Exhibition

“Cezanne” is curated by Ulf Küster, Senior Curator at the Fondation Beyeler.

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Exhibition guide

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We look forward to receiving your feedback on the exhibition guide at: kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch

CATALOGUE



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Upcoming exhibition:

PIERRE HUYGHE

24 May – 13 September 2026

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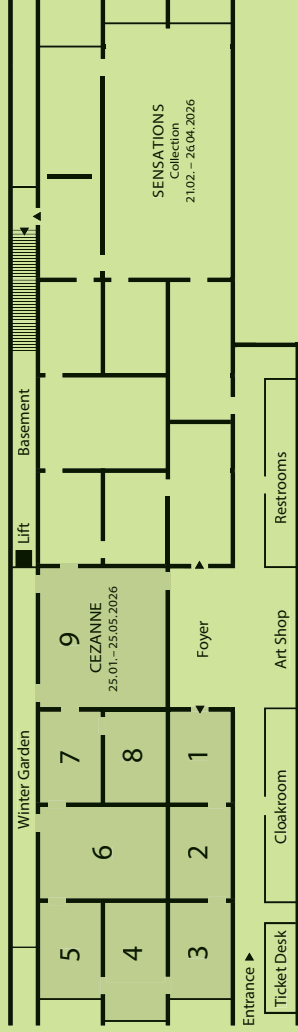
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Please do not touch the artworks!