

CÉZANNE'S CARD PLAYERS

21 October 2010 to 16 January 2011

Paul Cézanne's famous paintings of peasant card players and pipe smokers have long been considered to be among his most iconic and powerful works. This landmark exhibition, organised by The Courtauld Gallery in London and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is the first to focus on this group of masterpieces. Described by Cézanne's early biographer, Gustav Coquiott, as being "equal to the most beautiful works of art in the world", this is a unique opportunity to enjoy these remarkable paintings in unprecedented depth. The exhibition brings together the most comprehensive group of these works ever staged, including three of the *Card Players* paintings, five of the most outstanding peasant portraits and the majority of the exquisite preparatory drawings, watercolours and oil studies. Cézanne's *Card Players* stand alongside his *Bathers* series as the most ambitious and complex figurative works of his career.

The first mention of the *Card Players* series comes in 1891 when the writer Paul Alexis visited Cézanne's studio in Aix-en-Provence and found the artist painting a local peasant from the farm on his estate, the Jas de Bouffan. A number of different farm workers came to sit for him over the years, often smoking their clay pipes. They included an old gardener known as *le père* Alexandre and Paulin Paulet, who posed as the figure seated on the left in *The Card Players* (fig. 2), a task for which he was paid five francs. Cézanne's depictions of card players would prove to be one of his most ambitious projects and occupied him for several years. It resulted in five closely related canvases of different sizes showing men seated at a rustic table playing cards, including versions from The Courtauld Gallery (fig. 1), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 2) and the Musée d'Orsay (fig. 3). Alongside these he produced a larger number of paintings of the individual farm workers who appear in the *Card Players* compositions, major examples of which will be reunited from the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth (fig. 4), the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg (fig. 6), the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, together with The Courtauld's *Man with a Pipe* (fig. 5).

Cézanne devoted himself to his peasant card players, often repeating his compositions, striving to express the essence of these sun-beaten farm workers whom he found so compelling. Rather than posing his models as a group playing cards, Cézanne made studies of them individually and only brought them together as opponents on the canvas itself. For him, the local peasants of Aix were the human equivalent of his beloved Montaigne Sainte-Victoire that presided over the town – steadfast, unchanging and monumental. As he later put it, "I love above all else the appearance of people who have grown old without breaking with old customs". Cézanne's card players are not shown as rowdy drinkers and gamblers in the way that, for centuries, peasants had been depicted in rural genre paintings. Rather, they are stoical and completely absorbed in the time-honoured ritual of their game. As the famous English critic Roger Fry wrote in 1927: "It is hard to think of any design since those of the great Italian Primitives... which gives us so extraordinary a sense of monumental gravity and resistance – of something that has found its centre and can never be moved."

The monumentality of the works epitomises Cézanne's stated aim to produce "something solid and durable, like the art of the museums". Appropriately, one of the first works by Cézanne to enter a museum collection was *The Card Players* (fig. 3), which was accepted by the Louvre in 1911, five years after the artist's death.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Cézanne's card player and peasant works is that their evocation of unchanging traditions was achieved by pushing the boundaries of painting in radical new directions. Cézanne painted freely and inventively, rendering his peasants through a vibrant patchwork of brushstrokes which animates the surface of the paintings. For most nineteenth-century viewers his technique would have appeared as coarse as his peasant subject matter but the *Card Players* would prove an inspiration to later generations of avant-garde artists. For Pablo Picasso, Cézanne's peasants were a touchstone for his Cubist portraits and their example resonates throughout the twentieth century with particular *homages* paid to them by artists as diverse as Fernand Léger and Jeff Wall.

The Courtauld Gallery's world-renowned Cézanne collection includes two of the masterpieces from this series, *The Card Players* and *Man with a Pipe* (figs. 1 and 5). These will be joined by major loans from international collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which will be the second venue for the exhibition from 9 February to 8 May 2011.

Cézanne's creation of a relatively large number of preparatory works for the *Card Players* paintings was highly unusual and indicates his commitment to this ambitious series. In preparation for the exhibition, The Courtauld and the Metropolitan collaborated on the first technical research project to look systematically at this group of works. This has shed fresh light on Cézanne's working practice. Most importantly, by examining the extent of underdrawing on each canvas it has challenged established views about the sequence in which he produced the paintings. Whereas it has traditionally been assumed that he worked from the largest paintings to the smallest, gradually simplifying the scenes, it now seems clear that he started the series with the smaller canvases, using them to establish his iconic compositions.

Cézanne's Card Players is the latest in a successful series of focused exhibitions organised by The Courtauld Gallery, in which masterpieces from its own collection are re-examined in the context of important closely related loans from international museums and galleries. The show is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, including contributions from leading Cézanne scholars, John House (The Courtauld Institute of Art) and Richard Shiff (University of Texas at Austin).

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/Fact Sheet

FACT SHEET

- Exhibition:** *Cézanne's Card Players*
- Dates:** 21 October 2010 to 16 January 2011
- Organised by:** The Courtauld Gallery, London, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- Supported by:** The Friends of The Courtauld
The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation
- Location:** The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2526, Fax. +44 (0)20 7848 2589
www.courtauld.ac.uk
- Opening hours:** Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm
- Card Players Lates:** Until 9 pm on Thursday 28 October, 25 November 2010 and 13 January 2011. The Late Night events will include the exhibition and collection, live music and gallery talks, card magic, French short films from Cézanne's time and Provençal refreshments in The Courtauld Gallery Café. Supported by The Art Fund. Normal admission fees apply.
- Admission:** Included in admission to permanent collection:
Adult: £6.00, concessions: £4.50
On-line booking www.courtauld.ac.uk/tickets
Free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm, except public holidays, at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged.
- Catalogue:** The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue edited by Nancy Ireson and Barnaby Wright, with essays by Nancy Ireson, Barnaby Wright, John House, Richard Schiff, Aviva Burnstock, Caroline Campbell and Charlotte Hale, published by Paul Holberton in association with The Courtauld Gallery, 160 pages, 100 colour illustrations, 260 x 216 mm.
Paperback, ISBN 978 1 907372 117, price £25
- Related Display:** A selection of works on the theme of peasants from The Courtauld's drawings collection is on view.
- Gallery Talks:** There will be a programme of talks by curators and Courtauld students. All talks are free with admission.
- Curator's Talks**
Wednesday 3 November, 1 December 2010 and 12 January 2011, 5.15 pm to 6 pm
- Lunchtime Talks**
Friday 5 November, 19 November, 3 December, 17 December 2010 and 7 January 2011, 1.15 to 1.30 pm
- Sunday Tours**
Every Sunday 24 October 2010 to 16 January 2011 (except 26 December 2010), 3.00 to 3.45 pm

- Study Day:** **Cézanne's *Card Players* in Context**
Saturday 11 December 2010, 10.30 am to 4.15 pm
Explore the making and meaning of these celebrated masterpieces, look at Cézanne's treatment of the human figure and investigate the image and representation of peasants in 19th century French literature. £35 (concessions £30)
Booking essential: short.courses@courtauld.ac.uk, 020 7848 2678
- Access:** The Gallery is wheelchair accessible with a lift to all floors.
- Shop:** The Courtauld Gallery Shop is open daily during Gallery hours offering catalogues, art books and prints as well as gifts, such as ceramics, textiles and jewellery, inspired by the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions.
Online shop: www.courtauldshop.com
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2579, shop@scenterprises.com
- Café:** The Courtauld Gallery Café is open daily from 10 am to 5.30 pm serving a new menu of drinks and freshly prepared meals.
- How to get there:** The Courtauld Gallery is situated in the North Building of Somerset House, which has entrances from the Strand and the Victoria Embankment. Mainline trains to Charing Cross, Waterloo or Blackfriars; underground stations Temple (District and Circle lines), Covent Garden (Piccadilly line) and Charing Cross (Northern, Bakerloo and Jubilee lines); buses 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 23, 77a, 91 and 176 to Strand.
- Second venue:** The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
9 February to 8 May 2011