

Roger Fry: Aligning Himself with the Half Idiot, Half Divine

Sandra Boks, MA *Curating the Art Museum* '12

'I am not a great artist; I am only a serious artist with some sensitivity, enough taste and more intelligence than average painters.'

- Roger Fry, 1920

In his writings, Fry makes a distinction between great artists, serious artists and average painters. This suggests that there is some essential quality that Fry recognises in great artists but does not possess himself. Fry's conception of the ideal artist was embodied by Paul Cézanne, whom he described as 'the perfect realisation of the type of the artist'.¹ He rejected the conventional idea of the artist celebrated by Giorgio Vasari during the Renaissance in order to create a new and modern characterisation of the artist. Before looking at Fry's writings about Cézanne it is interesting to look at the type of the artist that he rejects in order for Cézanne to take its place.

During the 16th century, Vasari valued artists not only for their artistic achievements but also principally for their intellectual abilities. He saw these two skills as essential to artistic success. Vasari regarded Michelangelo as the greatest artist of his time; he even elevated him to a divine being. In his introduction to Michelangelo in *Lives of the Artists* he writes:

*[God himself] wanted to join to this [artistic] spirit true moral philosophy and the gift of sweet poetry, so that the world would admire and prefer him for the wholly singular example of his life, his work, the holiness of his habits, and all his human undertakings.*²

Michelangelo's personal life and additional talents for philosophy and poetry were seen as inextricably intertwined with his artistic output, and the totality of this resulted in his reputation as a divine being.

Similar to Vasari's praise of Michelangelo, Fry wrote about Paul Cézanne in a reverent way. He described Cézanne as the 'tribal deity' and 'totem' of artists of the early twentieth century.³ But rather than claiming Cézanne to be divine, he wrote that in modern society the artist is better defined as a person who is 'half idiot, half divine'.⁴ In direct contrast

with Vasari, Fry proposes the idea that an artist is unable to be educated. He suggests that for the artist there is no need for additional knowledge in the other arts such as poetry and philosophy. He referred to Cézanne's opinions as 'fantastic, absurd or naïve'.⁵ He even wrote; 'Cezanne had no intellectual independence. I doubt if he had the faintest conception of intellectual truth', but continued to say that 'this is not do deny that he had a powerful mind'.⁶

It was this powerful mind and the artistic expression of Cézanne that influenced Fry's own artistic practice. In the light of Fry's writings about his ideal type of artist, it is interesting to look at two paintings by him that were clearly inspired by Cézanne, which both feature in this exhibition. The first is [Copy of a Self-Portrait by Cézanne](#), made in 1925. The second painting is [Self-Portrait](#), made in 1928. Both works testify to Fry's admiration of Paul Cézanne, but they also show his desire to align himself with the artist whom he regarded as the 'the great and original genius' who started Impressionism.⁷

Copy of a Self-Portrait by Cézanne was produced simultaneously with Fry's influential book *Cézanne: A Study of His Development*, 1927. In this book Fry advised artists to nourish their spiritual being by absorbing Cézanne's essence.⁸ He does not specify in his writing how exactly this should be done, but his own artistic practice offers one example of a way to do this.

Fry made a faithful copy of Cézanne's self-portrait [Chauve](#) (1880-1881) with the exception of a few minor changes that add to the solidity of the portrait. His major change to the original is the diminishing of the flatness by reducing the tonal contrast in the wallpaper behind the head. The result of this is that the decorative pattern is no longer competing with the sitter's facial features, but instead recedes 'and allows the head to emerge unequivocally from the background'.⁹

The result of Fry's process of copying this work can be found in his *Self-Portrait of 1928*. This painting clearly resonates with Cézanne's *Chauve* in terms of composition and proportions. He is posing in a similar way and has also imitated the spatial effect of the decorative background by inserting background door panels in his own painting.¹⁰

Between the lines of his writings, Fry seems to assert himself as more of an intellectual than Cézanne, but in artistic expression he openly admits that Cézanne is his superior. This suggests that an artist no longer needs to master both artistic and intellectual expression, as was advocated by Giorgio Vasari. In modern society, the great artist can be half idiot, as long as his artistic expression makes up for it. Fry defines himself as an intellectual and a serious artist, and his emulation of Cézanne's work shows his desire to improve that

part of himself already inherent to great artists: a sense of divinity that is hard to obtain through intellectual practice.

¹ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1981), 182.

² Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 414.

³ Roger Fry, *Cézanne: a study of his development* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), 1.

⁴ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, 179.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 182-183.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁷ Christopher Green, *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art* (London: The Courtauld Gallery, 1999), 144-145.

⁸ Roger Fry, *Cézanne*, 1.

⁹ Christopher Reed, 'The Fry Collection at the Courtauld Institute Galleries,' *The Burlington Magazine*, 132: 1052, (1990): 766-772.

¹⁰ Frances Spalding in *Annual Review* by National Art Collections Fund, (1994): 128-129.