

# A Brief Analysis of Temporality and Spatiality in Painting—Illustrated by Cezanne's Works

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**Abstract:** *As important perspectives for interpreting the modernity of works, time and space are presented to the audience through many different forms of presentation. This article will analyze the temporality and spatiality in painting as well as the relationship between painting and color through the example of Cezanne's works. Through the analysis of the visual form of his works, this article explores the relationship between the generation, construction, and temporality of his works.*

**Keywords:** *Painting, Temporality, Spatiality, Cezanne*

## 1. Presentation of Painting and Thingness

From the traditional perspective of artistic classification, fine arts are regarded as a spatial art. Painting works are typically presented in a two-dimensional, planar form. However, since the advent of modernist movements, Western painting has gradually expanded from the plane into space. Thingness, or the essence of objects, is a general perception of how humans conceive and reflect on the world. In the history of Western thought, the concept of thingness dates back to ancient Greece, where Plato attributed the origin of the world to ideas. He proposed the "theory of three beds," arguing that art is a "mimicry of mimicry" of reality and therefore should be banished from the ideal state. Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the understanding of thingness shifted towards the concept of "correlated objects,"<sup>[1]</sup> aiming to transcend subjective thinking. For instance, Husserl's philosophy in phenomenology is founded on intentional objects<sup>[2]</sup>. The conceptual schemas underlying the view of thingness often include theories of entity attributes, sensory composites, formal materials, etc., which have also been manifested in historical concepts and creations of images.

Painting, as an artistic form, is the crystallization of the painter's perception and cognition. Artists incorporate their understanding and experience of the living world into images, presenting them in the visual realm. This not only showcases the visualization of specific objects but also reveals the information contained in the language of images, such as composition, color, brushstrokes, and personal stylistic features. More importantly, it expresses the unique thoughts and emotions of the painter. Influenced by the Western "imitation theory," traditional Western painting is generally regarded as a "spatial art." Paintings recreate specific objects through methods such as object structure, light perception, color, texture, and spatial relationships. They capture a moment in the flow of time within a selected scene to present temporality. On this basis, artists can create irreplaceable and exquisite works with their unique perspectives and personal styles, leaving behind their own distinctive trails in the boundless realm of artistic creation.

In traditional concepts of time, we often view time as motion within space. This concept of "duration" was initially proposed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. However, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger challenged traditional views of time from a different angle. Heidegger argued that in daily life, we must be aware of our concern for time and the need to measure it, as the moment is the source and essence of time. From Heidegger's perspective, time is not merely a quantitative unit or a linearly passing phenomenon. Instead, it is one of the core considerations in our existence in the world. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing explored the temporal differences between plastic arts and poetic arts, grasping the unique ways in which different artistic forms express temporal characteristics. Domestic scholar Mr. Wang Chaowen proposed as early as 1989 that spatial form sculptures also possess certain temporal features, demonstrating that various artistic forms pay attention to and present temporality. Furthermore, in exhibiting natural objectivity and a sense of order, there is a greater emphasis on expressing present feelings, listening to bodily perceptions, and creating unique emotional factors

embedded in painting sketches under specific spatiotemporal conditions.

Henri Bergson's concept of "duration" interprets the essence of time from the perspective of consciousness. He views time as a constantly flowing and changing "duration" of psychological facts, with the role of memory in perception as its core content. This also reveals that in the process of observation and creation, traditional modeling rules are always repeated with variations. Most of Paul Cezanne's mature works are based on sketches, exhibiting Bergsonian characteristics of "duration" in his observation and composition of the picture. Furthermore, the trembling sensation of Cezanne's colors plays a crucial role in the expression of his mature works. This trembling sensation differs from the calm expression of colors in classical painting, better aligning with the artist's pursuit of perfection and excellence in presenting his own feelings and the visual experience of the audience.

Art historian Hamilton believes that "in some works, Paul Cezanne, with varying degrees of success, achieves duration rather than instantaneous succession of time in painting. Impressionist painters' works consist only of individual 'instantaneous' scenes without duration, while Cezanne strives for the unity of time and space."<sup>[3]</sup> Through the duration of time, we can understand the "density of observation" present in Cezanne's works, which is a viewing density aggregated from repeated observation, feeling, and perception. However, "duration" alone cannot effectively explain Cezanne's use of color and the overall characteristics of his paintings. Works by artists such as Pissarro and Monet also exhibit a similar accumulation of viewing experiences in their color usage, and Bergson's "duration" describes the universal characteristics of consciousness.

## 2. Spatiality in Painting

### 2.1. The Focus on Spatiality

During the Renaissance period, Alberti's linear perspective became the fundamental principle of visual understanding and painting, particularly in representational art. Dürer's engraving, "Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman" (Figure 1), was created under the guidance of this principle. The engraving depicts a draftsman on the right side, observing a model through a device equipped with a grid in the center of the image. This device, resembling the "velo" described by Alberti, precisely transforms the complex three-dimensional space of the real object into a simple and clear relationship within a planar grid. This is the most direct and effective application of the principle of the cross-section of the visual pyramid. This visual understanding method emphasizes the reproduction of the authentic spatial relationships of objects. The image is a cross-section of the visual pyramid, transforming the spatial depth relationships between objects in the real world into a two-dimensional representation. This means that the distances between objects and the painter's eye are based on spatial dimensions rather than mere observation. Leonardo da Vinci emphasized the process of measurement and reasoning in his works, rather than relying solely on his visual perception, further testament to the fact that pure observation can be easily deceived by appearances.



Figure 1: Dürer, Engraving "Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman"

### 2.2. Representation of Temporality through Color

In Cezanne's paintings, although color plays a crucial role, he did not view any single dimension, whether it be drawing or color, as the essence of painting. He believed that "when color is rich, form is also complete. The contrast and resonance of tones are the secrets of drawing and three-dimensionality."

Cezanne's understanding of color was not merely subordinate to the form of drawing, but rather he reconstructed color in his paintings into a state resembling the flow of life, breaking with past habits of interpreting painting forms and materials separately. While color and drawing are distinct, they are interconnected and mutually enhancing. Cezanne's painting process reflected a responsive engagement with the spontaneous nature of objects, always striving to observe and express the truth of things in each specific context. Every stroke corresponded to the breath of the figure and the light, whether it was here—on my canvas, or there—on his beard and face. I, my model, and my colors, we should be integrated, jointly expressing the subtle changes of every minute.<sup>[4]</sup>

Color is a truly remarkable phenomenon. It is not merely a manifestation of the objective attributes on the surface of objects, but a bridge connecting the subject of painting with the multi-layered meanings of physicality. When we admire a painting, color plays a pivotal role, allowing us to feel the profound interpretation of the painter's emotions and thoughts towards the work. Over time, Cezanne's image creation began to exhibit temporal and spatial dimensions. Through his realistic depictions of physicality, he revealed the generative relationship between the subject and physicality, where they merge and intertwine. This understanding is also reflected in his deep exploration of the forms of things and the generation of color—it seems to transcend the fixed boundaries of objects, emphasizing the significance of relationships and events. Although physicality cannot be separated from subjective relationships, it retains its objectivity and self-sufficiency. Cezanne desired to endow generative color with a solid structure, which was not merely a simplification of Impressionist colors into an orderly arrangement—there was a fundamental difference between the two. Greenberg also clarified the structural issues of Impressionism, arguing that Impressionist paintings possess their own unique structures, which "are not inherently inferior to other kinds of composition, nor do they lack 'structure' in comparison to them."<sup>[5]</sup> However, Cezanne aspired to achieve a more solid and distinct structural style. Therefore, it is inappropriate to oppose Cezanne's generative color to structure or to simply oppose the generative nature of his color to the pursuit of eternity. The generative expression of color and its solid structure are inherently integrated.

In Cezanne's mature works, he integrated a sense of order into his color representation, manifesting it through visible brushstrokes and the regular arrangement of large color blocks. He attempted to translate the complexity of the visible world into a planar expression, primarily through the exhibition of color's complexity and sense of order. However, he did not resist the illusion of spatial depth or eliminate its representation; instead, he transformed elements like spatial depth into a planar language. Cezanne employed color and shape to create sequences and order on the plane, while simultaneously communicating the trembling sensation and generative nature of color in visual perception. Consequently, the tension between depth and planarity in Western representational art was addressed: color blocks, shapes, and their distribution sequences retained ample significance as planar graphic symbols, subtly hinting at variations in spatial depth through subtle differences.

Another prominent feature of Cezanne's creation is his preference for passion and vitality, a trait that tends to break through the stability of his compositions. In his mature phase, he placed greater emphasis on harmonizing and balancing the interconnected relationships between the fluidity, passion, and structured order in his color representation. Therefore, neither his early passionate works nor his more structured works from his mature period can be separated alone. The throbbing vitality and orderliness are organically fused in his color expression.

The passionate colors in Cezanne's works are closely tied to his objective presentation of nature (Figure 2). One of his numerous depictions of the Monte Sainte-Victoire mountain demonstrates this. Through bold color application and geometric composition, he expressed the spatial relationship between the mountain and its surrounding environment. Based on sketches and emphasizing objectivity, these works show a unique perspective within a specific time and space. Consequently, compared to his earlier works, the colors in these later paintings exhibit a more generative expression. Instead of projecting subjective emotions into a virtual spacetime, they generate feelings through observation of specific objects and environments. Cezanne opposed a dogmatic approach to painting by merely copying what is seen in front of him. Instead, he gradually approached truth through a generative interaction between observation and depiction. He sought to establish a sympathetic and interactive experience between the external world and subjective perception, thereby creating an artistic space with temporality in its generative process.



Figure 2: "Montagne Sainte-Victoire" (1902-1904)

Cezanne's painting style presents us with a novel paradigm of temporality, one that not only transcends superficial thinking but also embodies the primal experience of materiality in the creative process. In Cezanne's view, observing and perceiving objects is a continuous process of discovery. Therefore, the act of painting itself demands arduous and sustained labor to capture the objective and natural qualities of objects. These meticulous and challenging creative processes are indispensable, as perceiving the nature of objects necessarily involves temporal continuity. Embarking on a new painting signifies a fresh start, discovery, and experience, rather than a mere replication of techniques and experiences. Consequently, Cezanne often made subtle adjustments to the angle within the same scene, striving to achieve the most authentic and accurate representation of the objective qualities of objects through a long and discovery-filled creative process.

The cultural context, current physical practices, and various other meanings revealed in the final presentation of the image works, regarding the objective truth of objects, emerge as the image solidifies into a complete painting. Through image creation, Cezanne merges cultural history with the immediate temporal and spatial realities of the present, revealing the intersection between the two. This leads to a condensation and presentation of the primal and authentic dimensions of occurrence. In this creative process of observation, perception, and expression, Cezanne maintains a respectful and cognitive approach to the objective natural qualities of objects, successfully depicting them as inspirational elements of the objective natural traits in his image works.

### 2.3. The Embodied Temporality of On-site

The temporality and spatiality of artworks are inseparable, jointly shaping the paradigm of visual representation. Since ancient Greece, people have embarked on the journey of exploring how to endow paintings with a sense of immersion for the viewer. This expressive technique reached its peak during the Renaissance and has been widely adopted. The logic of visual representation is founded on the premise that both the artist and the viewer are situated within the "here and now" of the scene depicted. This "here and now" also serves as an inherent manifestation of temporality. It is precisely this intertwining and integration of space and time that enables us to profoundly understand and appreciate the emotions and meanings conveyed by artworks. The "instantaneous mode of time" in Western imagery<sup>[6]</sup>, exemplified by painting, aims to express human feelings and emotions through visible compositional intentions. The entire painting seems to be captured in a fleeting glance, revealing a trend towards increasingly prominent temporal characteristics.

As human civilization continues to evolve, so do the intentions of artists in their creations. Initially, the world was objectively represented on canvas, emphasizing the physiological and psychological characteristics of the observer. Nowadays, there is a growing emphasis on individualized visual experiences, which are integrated into the works. The authority traditionally associated with imagery has gradually waned, and artists are now pursuing their own unique creative expressions and cultural values. In this process, they present the world and the inner emotions, thoughts, and mental states of humanity

in novel and distinctive ways. Therefore, in today's society, truly outstanding artworks are no longer mere representations of the shapes of things but rather unique styles and forms of expression created through the artist's understanding and perception of the observed world.

This shift is closely linked to the emergence of modern lifestyles and themes during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As modern capitalism's focus shifted to the importance of attention as a crucial factor, subjective attention emerged as the foundation for individuals' creative freedom. This cultural transformation led to a gradual shift from an aesthetics of permanence towards one emphasizing instantaneity and interiority, with a greater emphasis on the values of change and novelty. Against this backdrop, artists strive to capture unique visual experiences that are unforeseeable beforehand and unappreciable afterwards, expressing their distinct artistic styles and personalized expressions.

In painting, temporality is a crucial element that accentuates the time-based characteristics of images. The temporality of images possesses a dual nature: on one hand, it is influenced by the isomorphic structure of spatial paradigms and evolves alongside the development of interpretive models that oppose subject and object. This visual representation, where what the eye sees is considered true, has become the basis for the presentation of the world and materiality, relying on instantaneous visual impressions. On the other hand, it adds understanding of the changeability and flux of subjects and objects, integrating new perspectives on the vital interpretation of the subject and the world. The traditional binary interpretations of form and matter in painting are gradually being deconstructed, replaced by a deeper understanding of the temporal characteristics of matter. In this process, a new temporal path is emerging that promises to break the limitations of subject-object opposition in image representation.

### 3. Conclusions

Painting, as a pure artistic form of expressing the lived world, has continuously evolved over time. How it represents materiality and manifests temporality has become a crucial aspect in its historical development. This evolution reveals a shift from spatiality towards temporality, reinforced by the formation of the binary concept of subject and object.

In artworks, temporality is often defined by the mode of presentation. If a piece is exhibited to the viewer over a period of time, it possesses temporality. In painting, the temporality presented makes us more prone to being attracted and highlighted by the emphasis on the instantaneousness of the image, often equating it with the reality of materiality. However, this process can also create a distancing between humans and materiality, necessitating a reexamination and dismantling of this viewing paradigm.

Moreover, the temporality of painting in presenting materiality reveals how image creation breaks through the paradigm of subject-object opposition in experiencing matter, offering insights into integrating a new understanding of materiality. In the case of Cezanne's works, there is a greater pursuit of certainty, striving to "realize" the authenticity of the work through constructive visual forms, rather than succumbing to the endless flux of consciousness and time. Therefore, the generative and constructive nature of Cezanne's works exhibit an interconnected and symbiotic relationship, embodying a broad temporal significance.

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