

Portrait of Madame Cézanne, 1886-87 Paul Cézanne (French, 1839-1906)

Paul Cézanne's image of his wife breaks the rules of traditional portraiture with its colorful patchy brushwork.



Cézanne made more than 20 oil portraits and numerous drawings of his wife, Hortense. By all accounts, she took little interest in his work nor understood what he was trying to accomplish, but she consented to pose for him as often as he wished for many years. Cézanne painted very slowly and insisted that his models sit very still for hours on end. It must have been painful for Madame Cézanne (who loved to talk) to sit stiffly and silently “like an apple” while her husband painted. Sometimes He took as long as twenty minutes between brushstrokes.

What colors did Cézanne use to shape his wife's face?
What colors create the shadows around his wife's eye?
The side of her nose? Under her lip? Under her chin? What color calls attention to her ear? What color makes her nose come forward?

Oil on canvas; 18-7/16 x 15-5/16 inches.
Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Samuel S. White 3rd
and Vera White Collection, 1967, 1967-30-17.
Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art

- Cézanne used unconventional colors (dark green, yellow-green, red, and lavender) as well as the more usual pinks and tans to form the ins and outs of Madame Cézanne's face. He knew that the dark green and lavender were *cool colors* that would tend to recede, while the yellow and red were *warm colors* that would jump forward.

What do the various colored patches on Madame Cézanne's cheek have in common?

- Squinting will allow you to see how close in value the color patches are. (*Value* is a term that refers to the degree of lightness or darkness of a particular color.) Since the color patches on Madame Cézanne's cheek are roughly equal in value, they seem to create a unified skin tone. If some of these colors were significantly lighter (or darker) than others, they would tend to pull apart and make Madame Cézanne's skin look spotty.

Can you see evidence of the artist's brushwork?

- The patchy quality of Cézanne's brushwork and the direction of his hand are especially clear on Madame Cézanne's face.

Why have areas of the canvas been left unpainted?

- Unpainted (or thinly painted) areas on the eyelid, in the hair, on the jacket, and in the background let the white of the canvas show through, creating highlights that enliven darker surfaces.