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INSPIRATION POINTS : Places where you can still see the scenes that fired the imaginations of visionary artists : CEZANE'S AIX-EN-PROVENCE

March 31, 1996 | HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP | Drohojowska-Philp is a Los Angeles freelance writer

AIX-EN-PROVENCE, France — It was seven when I left my room at the Hotel Mercure-Paul Cezanne to breakfast on the morning light. Along stone streets built for horses and carriages, the sun showered through the branches of centenarian plane trees and blushed the stone of 17th and 18th century mansions.

Even by Southern California standards, the light in Aix-en-Provence is wondrous. That morning, the sky turned as iridescent as the inside of an abalone shell. It was that pink and gold light, along with the exotic mixture of pine forests, ocher stone cliffs, flowering oleander hedges and bright magenta bougainvillea that kept bringing artist Paul Cezanne back here to his birthplace.

The morning air was scented by wild lavender and thyme. Although Aix is populated by more than 100,000, it still feels like a village. I walked by shopkeepers performing that pleasant French ritual of hosing down the sidewalks, and stopped at a tiny food stall equipped with a counter and three stools. I sipped strong cafeau lait and watched Gallic pigeons search for breakfast, undisturbed by the Peugeotts and Renaults clattering along the narrow avenues.

Caffeine fortified, I embarked in earnest on the day's adventure: a tour of Cezanne's hometown. I was in Aix to pursue an occasional hobby of mine: comparing the actual landscape, cityscape or still-life with an artist's painting. It is a way of getting behind the artist's eyes, attempting to see as they do. France is full of such opportunities: the village of Auvers, where Vincent Van Gogh painted his last canvases; Giverny, where Claude Monet spent his final years recording the water lilies in his garden, and Aix-en-Provence, where Cezanne tirelessly painted Mt. Sainte-Victoire, the chalky mountain that rises six miles to the east.

I had begun my trip in Paris, where the first retrospective since 1937 of Cezanne's work was held at the Grand Palais last fall. That exhibition makes its only U.S. stop May 30-Aug. 18 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; it's benefited by 66 additional Cezanne works that can only be seen at the Barnes Foundation in nearby Merion, Pa. After three visits to the Paris show, I flew to Marseilles, where a hired car brought me to Aix in about an hour.

Aix-en-Provence is not only the birthplace of Paul Cezanne, it was one of his favorite subjects. As an old man, he wrote to a friend, "Were it not that I am deeply in love with the configuration of my country, I should not be here." On my first morning in Aix, soaking up the pearly light and herbal breezes, I could identify with such a sentiment. Cezanne covered hundreds of canvases with Aix's Mediterranean landscape, concentrating on Mt. Sainte-Victoire.

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Despite the changes to Aix since Cezanne died here in 1906, he would still recognize it. The fashionable stores along Cours Mirabeau now sell sturdy Provencal pottery and chic Parisian fashions, but the 18th century buildings have not changed, and some still sell things Cezanne would have bought, such as local olives,

goat cheese and muscadet wine.

I passed the fountain at La Rotonde, the very heart of Aix, and followed other early risers to Richelme Square, where an open air market offered a brilliant palette of fruits and vegetables. An ornate terra cotta fountain centered a shady plaza flanked by awning-covered cafes and Italianate stone buildings with intricate carving, pilasters and ironworks.

Aix has grown proud of Cezanne. The cobbled streets are buttoned with brass markers bearing his name and, like a Hansel and Gretel bread crumb path, they led me to key sites in Cezanne's life. The Aix Tourist Office at La Rotonde provides a map of what they call the Cezanne Circuit, which involves one to two hours of very pleasant walking around the city.

I began at the house where he was born in 1839, the only son of a prosperous Aixoise manufacturer and banker; I passed Les Deux Garçons Cafe, where Cezanne took his meals, and pressed on to the 15th century St. Sauveur Cathedral, where the artist worshiped daily.

The brass markers lead to the Lycee Mignet, formerly the College Royal Bourbon, where Cezanne studied the classics and became fluent in Greek and Latin. His classmate and best friend was the novelist Emile Zola. After graduation, Cezanne took classes in drawing and painting in the beautiful old Palace of Malta, now Aix's Granet Museum, containing a handful of Cezannes, including some Aix landscapes.

Cezanne attended the University of Aix and, when he proved an inept student of law and business, his father granted him an allowance to pursue his art. Zola, already living in Paris as an art critic and journalist, urged his friend to join him. From 1861 to 1899, Cezanne lived off and on in Paris and developed his art there. He was befriended by the group of artists that would come to be known as the Impressionists--Camille Pissarro, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Cezanne was included in exhibitions at the now-notorious Salon des Refuses, a collective protest of the official Parisian salons.

Over the years, many of these artists demonstrated their respect for Cezanne by buying his work. But Cezanne did not admire the "woolly" technique of his peers. He said, "I wanted to make of Impressionism something solid and durable, like the art of the museums."

Cezanne had brittle relationships with nearly everybody, including his family and friends. In 1869, he became lovers with his 19-year-old Parisian model, Hortense Figuet, but even after the birth of their son, Paul, Cezanne refused to tell his family. After his father died, leaving him a substantial inheritance, Cezanne returned to Aix, where he redoubled his efforts at painting Mt. Sainte-Victoire and the surrounding countryside. Known informally as the "Master of Aix," he was seen as a reclusive genius, and younger painters made pilgrimages to pay homage.

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Having completed the walking tour in Aix, I hired a taxi to visit nearby sites reflected in his paintings. I began at the edge of town at Jas de Bouffan, the 18th century estate purchased by Cezanne's father. Cezanne lived here for a few years and covered the dining room walls with murals. He painted many pictures of the lovely old house, surrounded by reflecting pools, gardens and fountains. On the top floor studio, he painted portraits of his parents and sisters.

Although recently purchased by the city of Aix, Jas de Bouffan is not open to the public. However, the house and the long drive lined with chestnut trees, a view that Cezanne often painted, can be seen from its front gates at 17 Rue de Galice.

From Jas de Bouffan I headed outside of town. About 15 minutes on the road to the village of Le Tholonet, I came to the yellow-stone Chateau Noir perched on the hill above the road. This angular building was a frequent subject of Cezanne in part because other estate owners were reluctant to let the eccentric artist wander around their grounds. Chateau Noir, however, stood vacant most of the year, and Cezanne leased two of its rooms to store equipment.

A carriage would bring the artist who, carrying a backpack loaded with paints, canvas and an easel, would climb the cliffs behind the chateau to paint. Standing in the heat or cold, he would place stroke after stroke of oil paint on the canvas, building the chunky volumes of rock, the feathery movement of trees, the changeable blues of sky.

"The sun here is so tremendous that it seems to me as if the objects are silhouetted not only in black and white, but in blue, red, brown and violet," he wrote in a letter to Pissarro in 1876. By midday, when the sun blasted all nuance from the scene, it was time for dejeuner.

From Chateau Noir, it is a short drive to Le Tholonet and the Cafe Thome, where Cezanne regularly dined. Following his example, I went to this pale yellow auberge with the red-tile roofs--one of those simple country inns that serves exceptional yet reasonably priced food. I sat at a table outside, in the shade of old maple trees. My provencal meal included puff pastry filled with tiny mussels, chicken breast stuffed with local mushrooms, a lemony chevre and fresh fruit from a nearby farm.

As the afternoon sun threw long blue shadows across the road, a 30-minute drive brought me to the other side of Aix, and to another subject that Cezanne loved to paint: Bibemus Quarry. The people of Aix have been using stone from this quarry since Roman times. Cezanne came here by carriage and would spend the night in the small stone cabin nearby. Here, the artist painted the hatched mounds of golden stone framed by pines and oaks. I looked about and realized that the landscape of boulders and angled pathways was Cubism found in nature.

The taxi headed back to Aix and one more essential stop--Cezanne's studio at Les Lauves, just a mile outside the city. After Cezanne's mother died in 1901, his two sisters forced the sale of Jas de Bouffan. The artist moved into an apartment at 23 Rue Bolegon, near the town square, and was forced to build an independent studio. Each day before dawn, the stooped and balding man would walk the hill to his studio to paint by the earliest light. He died in 1906, from a cold he got by walking home in the rain.

The car drops me at the front garden gate. I climb a winding staircase to a studio with 15-foot ceilings and vast expanses of window. The studio has been maintained as it was when Cezanne died: Easels, palettes, and paints are set about as though waiting for the master to arrive. Standing in a corner is the ladder he used when working on the series of enormous paintings called "The Bathers." A long vertical slit in the wall got them in and out of the studio.

Cezanne's still-life paintings always confound and delight me. In his studio are all the familiar props from his taut, gravity-defying arrangements--the plaster cherub, the collection of human skulls and the ginger pot. Seeing these everyday objects firsthand and knowing how they were daringly transformed, I realized how he had lived up to his ideal: "I want to astonish Paris with an apple!"

Before driving back to town, I walked half a mile up the road outside the studio to see Mt. Sainte-Victoire in the distance. Cezanne painted the mountain more than 50 times. I marveled at how brush strokes of colored pigment could capture not only the gray stone peak, the pines and the crystal air but also the seismic emotions of the artist who said his work was "based on sensations."

The taxi headed back to an Aix submerged in a haze of aquamarine. I took a friend's tip and dined that night at Chez Maxime, which was moderately priced

and proved a good, relaxing choice. Outside, a red awning, twinkly white lights, and a 3-century-old plane tree looked inviting. Inside, a chapel once devoted to St. Anthony had been turned into an informal restaurant. I had a succulent Provencal roast lamb, a garlicky salad and a gorgeous chocolate mousse cake. Cezanne never ate there. His loss.

I walked back to my hotel under a sky turned navy blue. No one else was around. There were so few street lamps that I could see beds of stars spiraling out to infinity. Shortly before his death, Cezanne wrote to his son: "I spend every day in this landscape, with its beautiful shapes. Indeed, I cannot imagine a more pleasant way or place to pass my time."

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GUIDEBOOK: Images of Provence

Getting there: KLM, Air France, British Air and Swissair offer one-stop, connecting flights to Nice from LAX, starting at \$1,066 round trip, advance ticket purchase. Staying there: Hotel Mercure Paul Cezanne; 40 Ave. Victor Hugo, 13100, Aix-en-Provence; tel. 011-33-42-263-473; rooms from between \$85-\$170 (double, with breakfast.

Where to eat: Chez Maxime, 12 Place Ramus, Aix-en-Provence; local telephone 42-262-851cqja; meals from \$21.

Route of Cezanne: Museum and Atelier of Paul Cezanne, 9 Ave. Paul-Cezanne; tel. 42-210-653; admission \$2.65, \$1.25 senior citizens and children; open every day but Tuesday, 10 a.m.-noon and 2:30-6 p.m. Granet Museum, Place Saint-Jean-de-Malte; tel. 42-381-470; admission \$3. Open every day but Tuesday, 10 a.m.-noon and 2-6 p.m..

Philadelphia retrospective: May 30-Sept. 1. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, 26th Street and Benjamin Franklin Parkway, P.O. Box 7646, Philadelphia, PA 19101-7646; tel. (215) 763-8100. For more information: French Government Tourist Office, 9454 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 715, Beverly Hills, CA 90212; tel. (310) 271-2358, fax 310-276-2835.

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