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1. Paul Cézanne, *La Femme (The Eternal Feminine)*, ca. 1876–8. Oil on canvas. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Galerie Bernheim-Jeune.

# *The Eternal Feminine*

## 1



THIS BOOK OPENS ON A NAKED, GOLDEN-HAIRED WOMAN INSTALLED ON a canopied platform furnished with a generous bed and a side table. Although out of doors, the setting calls a bedroom to mind. The backdrop is a city or town property wall, probably of stuccoed stone with a concrete cap; one sees foliage beyond it. On public display, this woman's Rubensesque body-as-spectacle has attracted an ecstatic crowd, but she is not working her audience as do stage performers. Her presentation is innocuous, her physical and facial expressions utterly blank. Sprawled on her pillowy throne, she is not the least bit provocative. Except for her flowing blonde hair, she has few attributes of beauty's portrayal and none of royalty on high. Vulnerable in her openness, she can neither incite nor appeal with her eyes, for she has none. She has been blinded, her eyeballs gouged out, her eye sockets overflow with clotted blood. On the table to her right sits a vase of flowers as one might expect to see at a woman's bedside. At her left, sharing the platform, an artist before an easel is aggressively painting the very picture we are looking at, working his palette at the precise point where he positioned himself in the composition. He looks to be Cézanne himself, although he lacks the beard that Cézanne sported throughout the 1870s – but he also has no mouth! That omission should not be given any psychological significance, as if he had rendered himself speechless; when sketching portrait heads of his wife, son, and himself, Cézanne often omits the mouth and chin.

Time and again it is said that the evolving image on his canvas is Mont Sainte-Victoire, the famous mountain near Cézanne's birthplace,

*Figure 1*

Aix-en-Provence. If this were so, the three motifs on the dais would combine as a triptych of stock subjects: still life, nude, and landscape. The picture on the easel is in progress, however, and far enough along to show a peaked canopy and the entire composition of the very event that we, the external viewers, see, so there's no need to place the motif in Cézanne's distant homeland just because a peaked tent resembles a peaked mountain. Anyway, the ancient, worn-down Mont Ste-Victoire does not have a sharp peak. For a mountain as peaked as that tent, one would look to Mount Fuji as painted by Hokusai.

The woman's flaccidity is set off against the spectators' arousal – some just arriving, others paying their respects or just taking a good look, make way for a trio pressing toward the dais: a mitred bishop bearing his pastoral crook, a tonsured monk, and a courtier or guard sporting a plumed toque and with a *baudrier* across his chest. He proffers a tray of wine and what appears to be fruit. Flanking these three most central characters are men in a variety of dress and attitudes, some bent in homage.

Details are clearer in a watercolor that may have served as a study for the oil painting. There one sees round yellow objects on the tray held by the guard, appearing to be less like brioche, as they are sometimes called, than apples (recalling the golden apple in ancient Greek lore that shepherd Paris awards Venus to acknowledge her as the most beautiful among goddesses). Three men at the upper left from our point of view are ecclesiastics; they wear *rabats*, the Roman collar worn by Catholic clergymen. Another man wears a gendarme-type hat and a red vest (*gilet rouge*). The man near him is coifed in a *perruque*, a popular wig from the seventeenth into the early nineteenth centuries worn mostly by lawyers and judges. He proffers what appears to be a book, or a slate, the lettering not fully decipherable. "BAN" can be made out, but the meaning remains obscure. It's been suggested that those letters are part of the word "BANQUE," implying that the man is offering up gold in keeping with the "love of gold" syndrome that permeated bourgeois society at the time. I think it's more likely a whole word signifying an edict. A roll of drum preceding a public proclamation is called (in French, of course)

Figure 2



2. Paul Cézanne, *The Eternal Feminine*. ca. 1876–8. Pencil, watercolor, and gouache. Private collection, Zurich. Photo: Wildenstein Gallery.

a *ban*, as is a round of rhythmical applause standing for something like “three cheers for the governor.” *Ban* can also be a negative, as in the expression, *être au ban de la société* (to be outlawed by society – “banned,” as in English).

Other men, especially those uppermost at the right side, are also wiggled. Below them a man in a banded shirt struggles with the only figure in the picture that is, I believe, a woman, grabbing for what looks like a flower fastened behind her ear. This aggressive component appears as well in other renderings to be taken up later. Into the picture plane from the lower right corner, long-haired angels blow heraldry trumpets. A youth in the lower margin, his back to the dais, raises one arm. Like others along the lower edge of the canvas, he is either making way for others or departing. Or is he calling attention to the spectacle?

The entire composition, which might have been inspired by a picture Cézanne had seen, reduces to one arrangement familiar to us from many examples out of both Christian and Pagan art history: the adoration of an elevated, deified woman – the Virgin Mary, a saint, or Venus; in our time the queen of the Rose Festival atop her float, or Miss America on the elevated runway, bringing to mind the accompanying song, “There she is . . .,” the pageant hardly differing from the Catholic tradition of crowning a chaste woman the Virgin or Esther. In Rubens’s painting of



3. Peter Paul Rubens, *Virgin and Child with Adorers*, 1627–8. Oil on canvas. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie. Photo: (Walter Steinkopf) Jörg Peters Anders.



4. Titian, *The Mother and Child Appearing to Saint Francis*. 1516–26. Oil on panel. Museo Civico, Ancona.

Figure 3

Figure 4

the Virgin and Child adored by a gathering of impassioned worshippers a mitred bishop in attendance is accompanied by a tonsured monk and a plumed courtier, as in Cézanne's picture, and in Titian's *Madonna and Child Appearing to Saint Francis*, one sees a mitred bishop and a monk. Adorations of a female personage elevated and with prelates among her adorers are a common feature of Renaissance and Baroque church art. Unlike the examples I've offered, however, in which the adorers are all in place at one moment, already there, in Cézanne's picture the bishop and his entourage are approaching the woman. They press through a crowd that had already gathered, and the artist on the platform is already in progress with his canvas.

As a structural motif, the "approach" shows up in contexts in which an elevated personage is approached by subordinates, as when a king or



5. Paul Cézanne, *The Apotheosis of Delacroix*, ca. 1875. Pencil and watercolor. Private collection, Switzerland. Photograph courtesy of John Rewald.

queen as His or Her Highness gives permission for a subject to approach, or, following courtroom decorum, when an attorney asks to approach the elevated judge on the bench. This theme of an approach also structures Cézanne's *Homage to Delacroix* in which a painter (said to be Cézanne) and a dog enter into the pictorial space (the dog can be made out in the tacked-on margin at the lower right). There one sees a remarkable similarity to the bishop and monk approaching the woman in *The Eternal Feminine*, and here, too, the viewer is led into the picture as if following the intruders. Has the painter arrived late for Delacroix's apotheosis? Has the bishop come to intervene in the idolatrous orgy, like Moses interrupting the Israelites' worship of the golden calf? Or will the bishop

Figure 5

participate? If to intervene, why would the courtier be bearing an offering of red wine and apples? If the objects on the platter are not golden apples but brioche, as some say, would the offering of bread and wine be sacramental – Jesus’ body and blood?

Whether Holy Mary, deified saint, or worshipped Venus, the controlling image in Cézanne’s composition, as in Titian’s and Rubens’s pictures, is the Woman. Her power issues from her glorified position in the biological order as creator of new life in her womb and repository for male passion within the same enigmatic vessel. Like any centralized power figure, she is axial: all elements of the picture relate to her. She organizes the composition and animates the characters. Her symbolic power personifies an entire range of biological and cultural attributes that demand adulation and obeisance, whether theological reverence for the Queen of Heaven in hope of salvation, secular obedience to one’s mother, or courtship of a woman to attain her. Yet Cézanne positioned the artist in the picture as a commensurate, if not competitive, creator. If displaying indifference to the woman’s plight, is he there simply to record the event, detached from the subject, not a participant but a sort of photojournalist? Or, by his action, is he taking authority over the woman as one takes power over idols by despoiling them?

Who is this woman? What institution put her on that platform, making a spectacle of her? What accounts for those prelates, those wigged lawyers and judges bowing before her in homage, that bishop with entourage just arriving? Why is she being offered food and drink? Questions pile up, jamming the stream, threatening blockage of a reasonable interpretation.

Even the title of the picture is a problem. Cézanne did not give it the title by which it is commonly known. Many pictures don’t get titled until such time as they are inventoried by an art dealer, exhibited, and sold. Most often the assigned label is what is known in the trade as a studio handle, and it’s probable that Cézanne’s dealer, Ambroise Vollard, when entering this canvas in his stockbook, called it *La Femme* as shorthand for identifying it among other pictures. The best example of studio handles

in such a context that I can offer is Manet's list of pictures delivered to his dealer Louis Martinet:

- My dear M. Martinet, I'm sending you
- 1 reclining woman (to be put in the Oriental room)
  - 2 the dead toreador
  - 3 view of a race in the Bois de Boulogne
  - 4 fish, etc. still life
  - 5 fish-fruit, pendants
  - 6 flowers
  - 7 the sea (the Union ship Kearsarge at anchor off Boulogne-sur-mer)
  - 8 the sea

Ten of the first twenty of 166 pictures in the 1874 exhibition of the Independents (soon thereafter called the Impressionists) exist today with titles differing from those in the exhibition catalogue (my not having examined the rest; if ten of twenty are implicated, then some seventy-five of the rest are likely also to be). For that exhibition, Renoir's brother, Edmond, prepared the catalogue and was in charge of titles, making them up if the painter hadn't, and changing those of which he didn't approve. Upset with Monet for his having sent too many pictures for inclusion and for giving them monotonous titles (*Entrance to a Village*, *Morning in a Village*, *Departing the Village*), Edmond pressed Monet to come up with a less banal name for his portrayal of a sunrise done from a window at Le Havre. Monet had offered *Impression*. Edmond elaborated it to read *Impression, Soleil Levant (Impression, Sunrise)*. The title stuck and indirectly gave the name Impressionists to those Independents whose styles coincided with Monet's, for the Independents on the whole were a motley group with most of them in dire need of dependence.

While works of art remain the same, titles tend to take power over imagery and influence how the pictured matter is perceived. In his memoirs of association with Cézanne, Vollard tells of Cézanne's reluctance to assign titles and of the painter Antoine Guillemet coming to his aid by



offering such labels as *Un Après-midi a Naples* (*An Afternoon in Naples*) and *Grog au Vin* (*The Wine Grog*) for two pictures that Vollard had in stock and for which he had apparently pressed Cézanne for titles.<sup>1</sup> Cézanne's canvas that currently goes by the title *Pastorale*, also as *L'Idylle* (*An Idyllic Day*), was listed in Vollard's stockbook as *Un repas sur l'herbe* (poetic for *Pique-nique*), while in the December 1915 issue of *Vanity Fair* it is titled *The Bathers* (responding, no doubt, to the nude women). For some highly imaginative reason that escapes me, the same canvas has also been known as *Don Quichotte sur les rives*. When given the opportunity, art historians select emotionally charged titles: Cézanne's *Le Festin* (*The Feast*) becomes *L'Orgie*; his *L'Enlèvement* (*The Abduction*) becomes *Le Rapt* (*The Rape*), and *Une Soirée famille* that Cézanne reduced to *Une Jeune fille au piano* (*A Young Girl Playing the Piano*) became widely known as *Overture à Tannhäuser* though having nothing to do with the opera.

Over the years, since its listing in Vollard's stockbook, Cézanne's *La Femme* has gone by several titles: *The Golden Calf*, *The Triumph of Woman*, *Apotheosis of Woman*, *La Belle Impéria*, *The Whore of Babylon*. I do not know the first instance of this picture being called *The Eternal Feminine* and am not at all sure at this point whether that title is appropriate. Because titles concocted by art dealers and curators usually derive from conventions established by precedent, when labeled thematically by resemblance to earlier works of art a picture is caused to betray a certifying pedigree of title. Different titles prompt the viewer to see the imagery according to the title's cues, thus promoting a different narrative for interpretation. Each hypothetical association with a historical motif may have merit to the degree that it works like a polymorphic synonym to reveal an aspect of the picture that cannot be taken in whole by any interpretation more specific than what the imagery may have meant to Cézanne. I am not of a mind that meaning is in the eye of the beholder, however, or that the quality of a work of art is measured by the quality of the beholder's perception. If any or all of the assigned titles are equally correct, they are as well equally false. Faulty descriptions – as in this

case failure to identify the cast of characters in the picture – promote bogus interpretations. While respecting the subjective position of the beholder (critics' or historians' point of view from their present), I'm of the opinion that the blind man who grasps the elephant's trunk and interprets that elephant as like a tree is no more reliable than the blind man grasping the elephant's tail and thinking rope.<sup>2</sup>

Still, how can anyone know what lurked behind Cézanne's eyes and projected such an aggregate of images in front of them? It would indeed be risky to assume that he had a clear and circumscribed idea in his head as if he were illustrating a text. So, too, would it be foolish to assign a first-instance meaning to any one of the labels, as if every woman named Mary is a virgin, or, if named Teresa, a saint. Lest one assume that this matter of picture titles changing like chameleons according to how images are perceived might be confined to modern art's bankruptcy of traditional themes and icons, think for a moment about Botticelli's *Primavera* that inspired one interpreter after another to dream up meanings for the various poses, gestures, facial expressions, and costumes. Some commentators see the complex of images as representing the Italian Renaissance in its spring tide of youth and exuberance, while others look to literary sources, debating whether the picture is an enigmatic illustration of Poliziano's *Stanze* or a nod to the famous joust and its protagonists Simonetta and Giuliano. From this speculative seed mix a number of alternative titles sprouted: *The Awakening of Simonetta in Elysium*, *The Marriage of Menipean Satire with Mercury*, *The Mystery of Womanhood*, *The Return of the Medicean Spring*, even *Two Gods Conspiring to Arrange the Meeting of Lovers* (that title as remote from the picture as Cézanne's *L'Idylle* christened *Don Quichotte sur les rives*).



THE SIDE GLANCES I'VE TAKEN WHEN ASSOCIATING THE THEMATIC structure of Cézanne's *Eternal Feminine* with imagery by Rubens and Titian will become hard looks as my text moves along. I'm on the lookout