

# The Gift

Cézanne's *The Artist's Studio* (1866)  
in Zola's *The Masterpiece* (1886)



1. Paul Cézanne, *The Artist's Studio (The Stove)*, c. 1866, National Gallery, London.

In 1866, the painter Paul Cézanne gave a small painting, *The Artist's Studio*, to his childhood friend, the writer Émile Zola. Twenty years later Zola incorporated the painting in his novel *The Masterpiece*, but not in a favorable way – a bitter return gift?

*That friendship lasts longest – if there is a chance of its being a success – in which friends both give and receive gifts. A man ought to be a friend to his friend and repay gift with gift. People should meet smiles with smiles and lies with treachery. Know – if you have a friend in whom you have sure confidence and wish to make use of him, you ought to exchange ideas and gifts with him and go to see him often.<sup>1</sup>*

### **The Gift**

In his groundbreaking anthropological study *Essai sur le don* (1923), Marcel Mauss outlined the way in which gift-giving creates moral bonds within societies. The gift-giver shows himself to be generous; the recipient, in accepting the gift, shows respect to the giver and thereby demonstrates his own generosity. At the same time, however, the gift also creates an obligation: the recipient is indebted to the giver, and must return the gift in one form or another; in so doing, he proves that his honor is at least equivalent to that of the giver. Gift-giving is thus a form of strategy: he who gives expects to receive something in

return; no gift is unselfish, but rather a means of securing status and future reward. Mauss' work is understood to have laid the basis for a theoretical understanding of the nature of social relations. It may also provide insight into one of the most complex relationships between an artist and a writer in the nineteenth century, namely that between Émile Zola and Paul Cézanne.

Somewhere around 1866, Cézanne painted a small picture (41 x 60 cm) depicting the stove in his studio in rue Beautrellis and gave it to Zola as a gift.<sup>2</sup> *The Artist's Studio* (fig. 1) is surely not one of Cézanne's best works – although it certainly has more charm than many of his other pictures of the period, with their scenes of rape and murder (fig. 2). It is nonetheless important because of its later appearance in Zola's infamous novel *The Masterpiece* (1886). It not only provides evidence of a deep and long-lasting link between the two men, but also offers a key to the understanding of the aesthetics of the novel, although it is rarely mentioned in the scholarly literature on the book.

*The Artist's Studio* is more a rough sketch than a finished picture. Set against an almost unrelieved black background, the stove and the canvas wedged behind it, its back to the viewer, are the two most clearly delineated elements. On the wall are a palette, a landscape sketch, and what looks like a plaster cast. To the right is an open cabinet holding several portfolios, with, on top, a wax-covered candlestick and a dish containing some indistinguishable yellow substance. The stove itself is a typical studio model and looks rather battered. It is lit, and there is a pile of ash beneath it; on it sits an (empty?) cast iron pot with two handles. In contrast to Cézanne's other works of the time, the brushwork is fairly tame and for the most part barely visible; the stove itself is executed with extraordinary plasticity and detail.<sup>3</sup> The coloration, too, is rather different from Cézanne's paintings of the early to mid 1860s: the palette is muted and cool, consisting of black, greys, browns and white, complemented only by the red of the fire and the blue sky and red-roofed yellow houses in the sketch.

How did such a work come to play a crucial role in one of the major novels of the nineteenth century, and what does its presence tell us of the nature of Zola and Cézanne's friendship and, above all, Zola's aesthetics?

## Zola and Cézanne

The story of the friendship between Zola and Cézanne is well known.<sup>4</sup> It began in 1852, while they were still at school in Aix. Cézanne, a burly boy with a strong temper, became the protector of the slightly younger and weaker Zola. Although opposite by nature, they seem to have been united by common affinities, particularly for the countryside and literature, above all the Romantics. Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset and others were the young men's idols, and their letters and exchanges, particularly those of Cézanne, are filled with macabre fantasies and visions inspired by their readings.<sup>5</sup> Each was apparently convinced of the other's genius, and they believed themselves destined for great things, perhaps even for collaboration.<sup>6</sup>

In 1858, however, Zola left Aix for Paris. Although his first years were marked by struggle and poverty, he soon built up a circle of friends and discovered his passion for art. Frequenting the Café Guerbois in the Batignolles quarter, he became friends with Manet and other artists then beginning to challenge the established art world. He remained in contact with Cézanne, who, having abandoned his studies and quit his father's bank in 1862, began to come to Paris regularly, also occasionally turning up at the artists' regular meeting places. It was in these early years that Cézanne executed a tender oil

1 Lines from the Scandinavian epic the *Edda*, quoted in M. Mauss, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1923), trans. I. Cunnison, London 1966.

2 For the location and date see: A. Robbins et al., *Cézanne in Britain*, exh. cat., National Gallery, London 2006-07, p. 74. J. Rewald, et al. *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne. A Catalogue raisonné*, 2 vols., New York 1996, vol. 1, 91. Zola was identified as the work's first owner in J. Adhémar et al., *Émile Zola*, exh. cat., Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris 1952, p. 53.

3 J. Rewald, *Cézanne, sa vie, son oeuvre, son amitié pour Zola*, Paris 1939, p. 166.

4 See: Rewald, op. cit. (note 3), as well as idem, *Cézanne. A Biography*, New York 1986 (first published 1948), and, more recently, among others: W. Andersen, *The Youth of Cézanne and Zola. Notoriety at Its Source: Art and Literature in Paris*, Boston 2003; R. Jean, *Cézanne et Zola se rencontrent*, Arles 1994; S. Monneret, *Cézanne, Zola: la fraternité du génie*, Paris 1978; and M. Schapiro, 'The Apples of Cézanne. An Essay on the Meaning of Still-Life

(1968)', in: M. Schapiro, *Modern Art. Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Selected Papers*, New York 1978, pp. 1-38.

5 See: M.L. Krumrine, 'Parisian Writers and the Early Work of Cézanne', in: L. Gowing (ed.), *Cézanne. The Early Years 1859-1872*, 1988, exh. cat., Royal Academy of Arts, London; Musée d'Orsay, Paris; National Gallery of Art, Washington 1988, p. 21.

6 In a letter of 1860, for example, Zola wrote that he had dreamed he had written a 'beautiful book, a wonderful book, which you had illustrated with beautiful, wonderful pictures. Both our names shown in letters of gold on the first page, and, inseparable in this fraternity of genius, were passed on to posterity.' See: É. Zola, *Correspondance*, ed. B.H. Bakker (ed), *Correspondence*, 5 vols, Montreal 1978, vol. 1, p. 141. (letter of 25 March 1860): 'J'ai fait un rêve, l'autre jour. J'avais écrit un beau, un livre sublime que tu avais illustré de belles, de sublimes gravures. Nos deux noms en lettres d'or brillaient, unis sur le premier feuillet, et, dans cette fraternité du génie, passaient inséparables à postérité'; translation in Krumrine, op. cit. (note 5), p. 21.



2. Paul Cézanne, *The Rape*, c. 1867. Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum

portrait of his boyhood friend (fig. 3), a testimony not only to his ongoing attachment to the author but also a gift intended to reinforce their ties at a period when they were already beginning to erode due to Zola's increasing success within the Parisian avant-garde. As such, we might also read it as an attempt to create a sense of indebtedness that Cézanne hoped would ensure Zola's support for his budding artistic career.

That Zola's new friends were having an increasing impact on his tastes and ideas, however, becomes apparent in his critiques for the daily newspaper *L'Événement*, which he used as a platform for defending their new style of painting. Not once is Cézanne mentioned in these articles; clearly, Zola was coming to prefer Manet's Naturalism to the over-heated Romanticism of his youth and its expression in pictures like *The Rape* (fig. 2),

also once in Zola's possession, or *The Murder* (c. 1867-68, Walker Art Gallery, London).<sup>7</sup> In 1866, finally, Zola re-published his newspaper articles as *Mon Salon*.<sup>8</sup> Although the pamphlet is dedicated to 'Mon Ami, Paul Cézanne' – and in this sense can also be seen as a (return) gift – it is evident that Cézanne was not to be included in his new pantheon of artistic heroes. Instead, the dedicatory text reads like a farewell to their younger days and the happy times they had once had: 'Happy are they who have memories! I envisage your role in my life as that of the pale young man of whom de Musset speaks. You are my whole youth; I find you mingled with all my joys; with all my sufferings. Our minds, in brotherhood, have developed side by side. We have faith in ourselves because we have penetrated each others' hearts and flesh.'<sup>9</sup> With *Mon Salon*, Zola embarked on a new aesthetic journey: in

7 *The Rape* was in Zola's possession. See: Ibid. p. 22  
8 Reprinted in E. Zola, *Mes haines: causeries littéraires*

*et artistiques; Mon salon* (1866); Edouard Manet, *étude biographique et critique*, 2nd ed., Paris 1879, pp. 257-261.

4. Paul Cézanne, *Self-portrait*, 1861-62. Private collection lill. Cézanne. *The Early Years*, cat. no. 21



3. Paul Cézanne, *Portrait of Zola*, c. 1862-64. Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence.



5. Eugène Delacroix, *Corner of the Studio (The Stove)*, 1830. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

the future, it would not be Romanticism, whose revolutionary ideology he had once shared with Cézanne, that would be his inspiration, but rather a pure and simple Naturalism, represented in painting by Manet, and in literature by Zola himself. Cézanne's strategy, if we may call it such, had clearly failed. Rather than supporting his friend, Zola increasingly insisted on the distance between them.

### The Artist's Studio

In this context, it is not insignificant that it was at exactly this time that Cézanne painted *The Artist's Studio* and gifted it to his friend. Like all gifts it was an expression of both desire and hope: desire to make a statement that would bind Zola to him, and the hope that not only would this statement be honored, but that it would also be answered in positive fashion. Things, however, turned out

9 Ibid., p. 258: 'Heureux ceux qui ont des souvenirs! Je te vois dans ma vie comme ce pâle jeune homme dont parle Musset. Tu es toute ma jeunesse; je te retrouve mêlé à chacune de mes joies, à chacune de mes souffrances. Nos esprits, dans leur fraternité, se sont développés côte à côte. Aujourd'hui, au jour du début, nous avons foi en nous, parce que nous avons pénétré nos cœurs et nos chairs'; translation in Krumrine, op. cit. (note 5), p. 21.

10 A. Sturgis, et al., *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, New Haven/London 2006, p. 102. See also: S. Schulze (ed.), *Innenleben - Die Kunst des Interieurs: Vermeer bis Kabakow*, Frankfurt am Main

1998, exh. cat. Städtisches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt am Main, p. 192.

11 Krumrine, however, points out that many of the tales about Cézanne were probably based more on hearsay than actual observation, as the artist rarely appeared in public, and when he did made a show of keeping resolutely silent; Krumrine, op. cit. (note 5), p. 20.

12 Unpublished letter, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des manuscrits, NAF no. 24518, p. 204 bis; cited in R.J. Niess, *Zola, Cézanne and Manet. A Study from L'Oeuvre*, Ann Arbor 1968, p. 90.

13 Rewald, op. cit. (note 4), p. 71.

14 Krumrine, op. cit. (note 5), p. 21.

6. Octave Tassaert, *The Artist's Studio*, 1845. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



rather differently. Analyzing the picture and the ideology it represents will help us to better understand the role it would later play in *The Masterpiece*.

As noted above, in contrast to Zola and to most artists of his generation, Cézanne in the 1860s was still deeply committed to Romanticism and the ideals of *la bohème*.<sup>10</sup> This stance is evident not only in his art, but also in his consequent adoption of bohemian dress and rough manners. Both anecdotal evidence and eyewitness accounts indicate that Cézanne made every effort to affront his Parisian acquaintances, so that by the mid-1860s the stories about him were legend.<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Zola, for example, Edmond Duranty described Cézanne arriving at a café on Place

Pigalle in his usual shabby costume, covered with splatters of paint and wearing a battered old hat.<sup>12</sup> At the Café Guerbois he would sometimes refuse to shake hands with Manet, a notorious dandy, with the excuse that he had not washed in a week.<sup>13</sup> Substantiation of Cézanne's desire to provoke may also be seen in his continuing to submit work to the Salon, in the full knowledge that he would be rejected.<sup>14</sup> And there is no doubt now, nor was there any at the time, that Cézanne was the model for the painter Maillolbert in Duranty's short story *Le peintre Louis Martin*, a description of the Paris art world of the mid-1860s. The narrator pays a visit to the painter, whom he has heard is 'very odd,' describing his studio as a sordid mess, akin to the home of a rag-picker



7. Claude Monet, *Corner of the Studio*, 1861. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

central motif, however, Cézanne was probably inspired not so much by these rather ironical images as by the work of the painter with whom he most strongly identified in this period, Eugène Delacroix. Delacroix's *Corner of the Studio (The Stove)* (fig. 5), which Cézanne could have seen at the posthumous sale of the artist's work in 1864, also presents the stove in splendid isolation, as a kind of metaphor for the self-imposed isolation of the Romantic artist, with his fiery temperament and refusal of the norms of society.<sup>17</sup> In Cézanne's picture, the canvas with its back to the viewer can also be interpreted as a proclamation of the artist's autonomy, his independence from, but also dismissal of, the exhibition and the market.<sup>18</sup>

Everything about the studio breathes poverty and neglect: it is cramped, dark and dirty. It expresses nothing of the hopefulness one might expect from a young painter recently arrived in Paris from the provinces and seeking to make his way. Instead, it conveys a sense of resignation – the same sort of resignation we find in the studio scene of the Romantic *peintre maudit* (and later suicide) Octave Tassaert (fig. 6), and very unlike the more exuberant pictures of Cézanne's friends of the period, for example Monet (fig. 7) or Bazille (fig. 8). In short, *The Artist's Studio* calls upon a Romantic and bohemian iconography entirely in line with Cézanne's persona at the time – in this sense it is also a kind of self-portrait – and completely different in both content and style from the artists then being championed by Cézanne's boyhood friend, Zola.

### The Artist's Studio in The Masterpiece

Is it any wonder, then, that when thinking of a work of art to symbolize failure, ineptitude,

or madman, and the artist himself as equally diabolical, savage and revolutionary.<sup>15</sup>

The intense gaze, determined set of the mouth and forehead, and the bloodshot eyes impart something of this diabolicalness to the artist's first self-portrait (fig. 4), painted in 1861. More important for our purposes, however, is the way in which *The Artist's Studio* may be said to reflect the same Romantic and bohemian pose. The stove was of course a practical necessity in the nineteenth-century studio; it could also, however, take on a more symbolic dimension – standing, as it does in so many caricatures of the 1830s and 40s, for the extreme poverty of the 'outsider' artist.<sup>16</sup> In his appropriation of the stove as the

15 E. Duranty, 'Le peintre Louis Martin', in: E. Duranty, *Les pays des arts*, Paris 1881, pp. 315-22; for the identification of Maillolbert with Cézanne see: Krumrine, op. cit. (note 5), p. 20 and Niess, op. cit. (note 12), p. 90.

16 See the caricatures of Gavarni and Daumier, discussed in Sturgis, op. cit. (note 10), pp. 90-93.

17 P. Junod, 'L'Atelier comme autoportrait', in: P. Griener and P.J. Schneemann (eds.), *Künstlerbilder – Images de l'artiste. Colloque du Comité International d'Histoire de*

*l'Art, Université de Lausanne, 9-12 juin 1994*, Bern/Berlin/Frankfurt a.M./New York/Paris/Vienna 1998, p. 91.

18 On the subject of the reversed canvas and its relationship to the market and exhibition economy see the present author's 'Presence in Absence: The Empty Studio as Self-Portrait', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 56 (2011) 2, pp. 241-262.

19 Niess, op. cit. (note 12), p. 87.





8. Frédéric Bazille, *The Studio in the Rue Condamine*, 1870. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

provincial *gaucherie* and the inanity of Romantic idealism Zola looked to his friend's picture as a model? There has of course been much speculation as to the real-life sources for Zola's characters in *The Masterpiece*. It is generally agreed, however, that Claude Lantier is based largely on Cézanne, and that the other characters are also to a certain degree drawn from Zola's circle of friends. Robert J. Niess, however, makes a good case for reading the novel not as a *roman à clef*, highlighting instead the ways in which Zola combines aspects of the real and imagined to create his characters. Moreover, for Niess, the novel is not so much (auto)biographical as an examination of a particular cultural moment: the transition from Romanticism to Naturalism, and the difficulties the author and his whole generation faced as one artistic system collapsed before another was fully in place.<sup>19</sup>

Claude, the most bohemian of the group, fails not only due to his heredity – the underlying theme of the entire Rougon-Macquart series – but also because of the times he lives in. The chimeras of the artistic past still haunt him, corrupting his vision of the world and making it impossible for him to make a real contribution to the new art. Zola stresses that Claude's world lies at the confluence of Delacroix and Courbet: 'Damn it,' cries Claude as he and Sandoz inspect the nearly-finished *Plein-Air*, 'It's still too dark! Delacroix, that. Can't get away from him. And the hand there, look at it. That's Courbet, pure Courbet! ... That's what's wrong with all of us, we're still wallowing in Romanticism. We dabbled in it too long when we were kids, and now we're in it up to the neck.'<sup>20</sup> And, indeed, Claude's fatal flaw is not simply his total obsession with painting and his inability to bring his work to completion: it

is also and above all his desire to combine Romantic idealism (the allegorical female figure) and Naturalism (the cityscape) in his “masterpiece” that leads to his downfall.

*The Artist's Studio* appears in three crucial scenes in the novel, and in each instance serves not only to delineate the moral character and aesthetic position of the personage in question, but also as a foil for the expression of Zola's own aesthetic views. In a kind of *ekphrasis*, Zola uses the painting to describe Christine's impression of Claude's studio on the morning after they meet. Although she was no longer afraid of the artist, ‘[The] studio [...] still rather frightened her. Glancing discretely about her, she was appalled by the disorder and apparent neglect. Last winter's ashes were still heaped up in front of the stove.’<sup>21</sup> The room is sparsely furnished, and the furniture that there is, is totally dilapidated. Her attention is drawn by a large deal table ‘littered with brushes, tubes of paint, unwashed crockery and a spirit stove on which stood a saucepan still splattered with vermicelli,’ and the large number of unframed sketches, hanging from floor to ceiling or in piles on the floor.<sup>22</sup> The disorder of the studio is clearly intended to reflect the confusion in Claude's mind, his lack of focus, while the numerous studies and absence of finished work reveal the artist's fundamental impotence. Claude's total disregard for convention and maniacal devotion to his work is further underlined by the dirtiness of the space. In this way, Zola characterizes Lantier as a typical bohemian artist; drawing on popular and conventional stereotypes, the description of the studio – clearly based on Cézanne's image – is used to outline a specific aesthetic and lifestyle ideology.

The second time *The Artist's Studio* appears, is in the context of one of the many heated discussions about the direction of contemporary art and the fate of the artist in the modern world. In chapter three, Claude and his friends pay a visit to the sculptor Mahoudeau, who is in the middle of sculpting an enormous bacchante that he plans to submit to the coming Salon. This provokes a burst of indignation from Lantier, who insists that she be not a mythological figure, but a

grape-picker, and proceeds to expound his own, somewhat muddled, theory of Naturalism. Just then, Sandoz discovers Mahoudeau's companion, Chaîne: ‘And there, completely obscured by Mahoudeau's gigantic work, sat the stolid Chaîne, silently copying on to a diminutive canvas the rusty old studio stove.’<sup>23</sup> Chaîne, a peasant from the South with a talent for wood-carving who had been tricked by an enthusiastic patron into believing he had a great future as a painter in Paris, is crude and boorish, and his art likewise. Describing the picture he is working on, which is clearly derived from the Cézanne, Zola writes: ‘And a clumsy job he made of it, succeeding only in reducing the purest and most vibrant colours to the same oppressive drab. But, for all his lack of skill, his great gift was accuracy. His infantile mind, still of the earth earthy, delighted in minute detail which he reproduced with the meticulous simplicity of a primitive. His stove, its perspective completely askew, was precise and lifeless and the colour of mud.’ Sandoz comments on the exactness of the depiction, and Claude, taking pity on the poor man, finds something to say in the picture's favor: ‘They'll never be able to call you a charlatan, anyhow, Chaîne. You do at least paint as you feel, and that's how it ought to be!’<sup>24</sup>

Towards the end of the novel, Sandoz and Lantier again encounter the stove painting, at a fair where Chaîne now runs a wheel-of-fortune booth. The stove, a copy after Mantegna, and *Woman taken in Adultery* – the only work Chaîne had managed to get admitted to the Salon – decorate the stand: ‘It was the sight of them in all their splendour that made Claude exclaim: “Good God, but they're wonderful...and perfect for that job!” The Mantegna especially, with its gaunt simplicity, was rather like a faded print nailed up for the enjoyment of simple folks, while the meticulous, lop-sided rendering of the stove, balanced by the ginger-bread Christ, looked unexpectedly funny.’<sup>25</sup>

*The Artist's Studio* plays several roles in these scenes. In the first instance, the crudity of the subject is linked to the rusticity of Chaîne himself: he paints as he is. Zola condemns the picture for its vulgarity, but also for its over-attention to detail, indicating that,

although sincere (as Claude says), such an approach was also no solution to the dilemmas of modern painting. This art – which, in the final analysis, is also Cézanne’s art – is not just Romantic and bohemian, and therefore out of date; it is also infantile, lacking all sophistication, good enough only for the fun-fair. Chaîne is also in many ways Cézanne’s alter-ego: he is crude and rough; he is a southerner, came to Paris on false pretenses; he never speaks; and he is inordinately stubborn in the face of continual failure. Again, through the medium of *The Artist’s Studio*, Zola delineates his own aesthetic position and condemns that of his childhood friend. As if things were not already bad enough with his transformation of Cézanne into the failed genius Lantier, Zola here goes a step further, inserting him into the one character in the novel who is treated with utter contempt, who is in no way redeemed or rewarded but only disparaged. Zola’s condemnation of Cézanne as a man and as an artist is complete, and even harsher than one might have imagined.

As Mauss points out, for the gift-giving strategy to work, gifts must always be repaid in kind. The gift of *The Artist’s Studio* was undoubtedly at least in part intended to remind Zola of the Romantic ideas the two men had once shared, given at a moment when they were already beginning to drift apart. As such it was perhaps designed to compel the author to reconsider his new aesthetic and to lend his support to Cézanne as he embarked on his own artistic career. Instead it appears to have merely reinforced Zola’s belief that his childhood companion was proceeding down the wrong road. Zola’s return ‘gifts’ can thus be read most clearly as forms of denial and rejection. Cézanne’s strategy was fruitless, but following on from Mauss’ theory, Zola broke the cardinal rule of social relations. His lack of compassion does nothing to diminish his

strength as an author, or the brilliance of *The Masterpiece*, but it does lend both a somewhat bitter aftertaste.

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20 É. Zola, *The Masterpiece*, trans. T. Walton, Oxford 2008, p. 39.

21 Ibid. p. 15.

22 Ibidem.

23 Zola, op. cit. (note 20), p. 59. According to Niess (op. cit. (note 12), p. 29), the character of Chaîne is based in part on Antony Valbrègue, a friend of Zola and Cézanne’s from Aix, and in part on a now entirely forgotten artist by

the name of Jean-Baptiste-Mattieu Chaillan, whom Zola refers to in his letters as a kind of pretentious simpleton, writing about him in his letters in much the same way as in the novel (pp. 33-34). See also P. Brady, “L’Oeuvre” de Émile Zola. *Roman sur les arts. Manifeste, autobiographie, roman à clef*, Geneva 1968, p. 248.

24 Ibid. pp. 59-60.

25 Ibid. p. 308.