



## "The Aesthetic Roots of *The Pine Tree* by André Derain"

In most art history classes André Derain (1880-1954) is commonly placed within the narrow band of fauvism that he helped engineer and inhabited for a short period of time. Fauvism lept into the art world with bright fierce colors, jarring combinations of reds and greens, oranges and blues, and other complementary colors precisely placed to create canvases that pulsed with life and feeling. It was shocking to most Salon goers who spit the term *les fauves* (wild beasts) as an insult. Derain's *Pont de Charing Cross*, 1906, is a typical piece of this period (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

*The Pine Tree*, 1913, reveals another side of Derain (fig. 2). Housed in the Portland Art Museum in the Mary Beth and Roger Burpee Gallery, *The Pine Tree* is exhibited with a group of cubism inspired pieces. Cubism began just a few years earlier than *The Pine Tree* and can be described as a geometric style showing different perspectives simultaneously while flattening the picture plane. George Braque's *Piano and Mandola*, 1909-1910, is an example of analytic cubism (fig. 3).<sup>2</sup>

*The Pine Tree* does not slip easily into an art history *-ism*. While Cubism does play a part in its aesthetic, it cannot be classified as wholly Cubist. It's somber tones and understated hues place it in diametric opposition to Derain's earlier Fauve pieces. What catalytic events purged Derain's work of saturated and vibrating color and instigated these new explorations?

### Earlier Modernist Influences

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<sup>1</sup> Musée de Lodeve, *Derain et Vlaminck 1900-1915*, Musée de Lodeve 22 Juin-28 Octobre 2001 (Milano: Mazzotta, 2001) 105.

Modernism was transforming the art world. Artists took inspiration from a variety of fertile sources: Japanese prints, African sculpture, children's drawings and art of the insane. Painting was undergoing radical changes. Several retrospectives that took place between 1901 and 1907 urged artists to grapple with the challenges presented by modernism.<sup>3</sup>

Derain actively explored the artistic terrain of his time. Not only did he study old masters' work at museums,<sup>4</sup> he was able to view a number of these retrospectives,<sup>5</sup> and he spent time with other contemporary artists.<sup>6</sup> Van Gogh's 1901 exhibition at Berheim-Jeune, Paris, brought Henri Matisse, Maurice Vlaminck, and André Derain together.<sup>7</sup> This recipe, inspired by Van Gogh's work, helped birth the Fauvist movement. Gauguin's 1906 exhibition at the Salon d'Automne in Paris further influenced the artistic production of Derain and other artists.<sup>8</sup> The influence of these two retrospectives are most evident in Derain's fauvist works, and even *The Pine Tree* has been touched by their revelations.

*The Pine Tree* lacks the vivid coloration of both Van Gogh's and Gauguin's work, but it possesses other shared qualities. The trunk and branches of the pine tree are boldly outlined. This outlining separates the color and flattens the image reminiscent of a Japanese print. *Japonisme* was a powerful force whose style was pervasive in the

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Avgikos, "Georges Braque," Online, Guggenheim Museum, Internet, 7 Apr. 2006.

<sup>3</sup> An artist's retrospective often occurs either after a long career or death and it shows the historical progression of the artist's work.

<sup>4</sup> Russell Warren Howe, "Andre Derain," *Apollo* Feb. 1955: 48. He often studied the work by painting a copy of it.

<sup>5</sup> "Derain, André, 1: Early Period, Fauvist works and historicism," (Oxford University Press, 2006) *Grove Art Online*. Online. Internet. 9 Apr. 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah C. Faunce, "Derain: Illusion and Disillusion," *Art News* Nov. 1964: 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Grove Art Online*, "Derain, André, 1: Early Period, Fauvist works and historicism."

<sup>8</sup> *Grove Art Online*, "Derain, André, 1: Early Period, Fauvist works and historicism."

European artworld and was re-interpreted by several artists whose work in turn was a source of inspiration for others. Both Van Gogh and Gauguin who had incorporated Japanese print aesthetics into their painting mainly through the flat use of color and dark outlines stylistically impacted the artworld. Derain's *The Pine Tree* expresses this influence as well as the influence of the "primitive" which was so evident in Gauguin's work. *The Pine Tree* embodies this in both subject matter and style. *The Pine Tree*, unlike many of Derain's earlier fauvist works, lacks human effect except for the vacant path that absurdly and abruptly ends at the foot of the tree. Unlike earlier picturesque landscape work that expressed idealized compositions of natural form, *The Pine Tree* is born out of a different aesthetic. It hearkens to a *pre-* or posthuman period in which elemental nature reigns supreme. Vigorous rapid brushstrokes shape the pine and lend a directional quality that suggests the passage of gusts of wind. Similar to Van Gogh's own emotive strokes yet lacking their impasto, Derain's own brushstrokes are often quite dry and expose the canvas weave. The use of these simple hues: raw umber, dark greens, deep grays, cool tans, stormy blue, emphasizes the natural element and helps convey a sense of the pure force of nature.

While the Van Gogh and Gauguin retrospectives mainly fueled the fauvist movement, the 1907 Cézanne retrospective at the Salon d'Automne sparked a counter response.<sup>9</sup> Some of the artists were beginning to recognize the limitations of fauvism and were ready for the next step.<sup>10</sup> Derain's work, especially *The Pine Tree* and other paintings in the same period, were heavily influenced by Cézanne. "The impact of this

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<sup>9</sup> A. Barskaia, E. Gheorghievskia, and N. Kalitina, *André Derain, A Painter Through the Ordeal by Fire* (Bournemouth, England: Parkstone/Aurora Editions, 1995) 23.

<sup>10</sup> Denys Sutton, *André Derain* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1956) 24. Derain, like Vlaminck, had realised that direct colourism was not sufficient; on the other hand, neither was prepared to completely

exhibition on the young artists was tremendous. Fifty-six of Cézanne's works assembled together were for them a sort of school, an academy. And Derain was one of its pupils."<sup>11</sup> It was also noted that "during 1907-1908, Derain produced a good many works close to the style of Cézanne."<sup>12</sup> Cézanne's work was also seen more often in commercial galleries as the works passed from dealer to dealer.<sup>13</sup> Cézanne's work influenced Derain's close artist friends<sup>14</sup> which must have helped solidify Derain's own exploration. Derain also focused much of his study of Cézanne on his landscapes.<sup>15</sup> This is quite evident when one looks at his work between the time period following the 1907 Cézanne retrospective all the way until 1913 when Derain began to focus on portraiture.

## Cubist Alliances

Derain, who had been very close to Vlaminck during his fauve period, shifted his

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surrender to the new style, and Cézanne offered a way out, one which they enthusiastically took.

<sup>11</sup> A. Barskaia 23.

<sup>12</sup> Institut Valencia D'Art Modern, *André Derain* (Lausana: Fondation de L'Hermitage, 2003) 116.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Lee. *Derain*, (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1990) 28.

<sup>14</sup> Edward F. Fry, "Cubism 1907-1908: an Early Eyewitness Account," *The Art Bulletin* March 1966: 70.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Lee 28. In the year 1908 Derain spent a full six months in the south of France, mostly at Martigues, and began a profound investigation into Cézanne's landscape paintings which he would continue until 1913. Derain's work of these five years are among the finest landscape paintings of the pre-war avant-garde. At the same time they are the most serious and consistent review of the work of Paul Cézanne--the mainstay and the measure of all of the Cézannism in Paris between 1908 and 1914.

focus and place of residence and forged a close alliance with Braque and Picasso.<sup>16</sup> Not only did he spend time with them in Paris, he was also joined by them in his periods away from Paris.<sup>17</sup> With such close companionship, it was inevitable that they would influence each other. One such example is that in Derain's *The Pine Tree*, one can see a similar palette to the one used during Picasso's analytical cubism phase.

Derain's *The Pine Tree* is in the midst of Cubist pieces at the Portland Art Museum, yet it cannot be classified as wholly Cubist. How does it relate to Cubism? Derain's piece to the left of it, *Still Life with Pitcher and Loaf of Bread*, 1912, seems more overtly Cubist and *The Pine Tree* seems much less Cubist than the other pieces in the area around it. How did Derain respond to Cubism? He was at the birth of Cubism from the beginning. He explored Cézanne with other artists, spent his days with Braque and Picasso who co-created Cubism, and he dabbled in some of the perspective changes that Cubism offered, yet he did not fully embrace it. He touched it, yet stood back from it and followed his own path.

Vlaminck writes, "Derain, whom I saw often, was all at sea and helpless. He studied the old masters and visited all the European museums. He found Cubism disquieting. Already this asexual art, born of ideas divorced from nature and even from painting itself, threatened to destroy him."<sup>18</sup>

Even though Derain was on close terms with Braque and Picasso, even to the point of sharing the same subject matter, he departed from them stylistically. "If one compares Derain's concept of landscape then with the practice of Braque and Picasso at

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<sup>16</sup> Jane Lee 28. In 1907 Derain moved from Chatou to Paris in Montmartre where he stayed until 1910. He saw Braque and Picasso almost daily while he was in Paris.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Lee 32. Derain spent extended summers painting outside of Paris. He was sometimes joined by Braque, Picasso, and Vlaminck.

the time, very different tendencies appear. Derain fluctuates between condensation of form and dissolution of form, and his dissolution, like Cézanne's, is "painterly" or unsystematic, whereas the Picasso-Braque duo systematically breaks form down in order to put it together systematically (see figs.4 and 5)."<sup>19</sup>

Braque's painting (fig.4) more closely resembles Derain's composition in that it has a white road leading to the figures of trees. Picasso's trees on the right (fig.5) show the light bark contrasted with the darker outline also found in Derain's piece. Picasso's trees are more static while Braque's image is more clearly Cubist than Derain's. Jean Cocteau stated, "Derain comes before Cubism and does not engage with it. He lived with Picasso and Braque. One can discern a profound relationship between them."<sup>20</sup> This helps explain *The Pine Tree's* position of being touched by Cubism, yet not wholly embodying it. M. Bernard Dorival further clarifies these artists' responses to Cubism in connection to Cézanne, "Cézanne's dictum about nature and the cone and cylinder was susceptible of two interpretations; forms can yield the small cylinders and cones which are integral to them or the reflections and light which they engender; that was what the Cubists managed to do between 1908 and 1911. But by means of a contrary approach, one that is closer to tradition, one can lead the form towards the cylinder or the cone that is able to enclose it; that was Derain's method, and this permitted him to remain closer to figuration than either Braque or Picasso"<sup>21</sup>

## Beyond Cézanne

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<sup>18</sup> Maurice Vlamincq, *Dangerous Corner* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1966) 77.

<sup>19</sup> Institut Valencia D'Art Modern 116.

<sup>20</sup> Institut Valencia D'Art Modern 116.

<sup>21</sup> Denys Sutton 25.

Derain's *The Pine Tree* is thematically very similar to Cézanne's *The Great Pine* (fig.6)<sup>22</sup> and *The Large Pine Tree* (fig.7).<sup>23</sup> All of these focus on one large pine tree. *The Great Pine* holds an even greater resemblance than *The Large Pine Tree*, which is just a study. Both emphasize branches with an expressed individuality. *The Great Pine* has a similar composition, but Derain pushes the interplay between foreground and background farther than Cézanne in this piece. Cézanne's *Aqueduct* (fig.8)<sup>24</sup> and *Pines and Rocks* (fig.9)<sup>25</sup> both show the whitened trunk found in Derain's piece. Both of these pieces also show some interplay between background and foreground. This is most apparent in the area of the tree foilage. Cézanne uses similar shapes, in darks and lights, to convey the background and foreground. By these strong contrasts and use of similar shapes, the background is brought forward. Derain also uses this same technique in his depiction of background and foreground (which is sky and foilage). Cézanne's *Rocks at Fontainebleau* (fig.10)<sup>26</sup> show this similar technique and also adds greater emphasis to enormous rocks in the bottom half of the painting. Similar rocks can be seen in the bottom portion of *Pines and Rocks* and in Derain's *Footpath in Fontainebleau* (fig.11)<sup>27</sup>. Not only did Derain paint in a similar style to Cézanne, he also painted in some of the same vicinities. How this relates to Derain's *The Pine Tree* at the Portland Art Museum is that these pictures show that Derain is wholly influenced by Cézanne in technique,

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<sup>22</sup> Federico Zeri, ed., *Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: NDE Canada Corp., 2000) 44.

<sup>23</sup> John Rewald, *Cézanne and America, Dealers, Collectors, Artists and Critics 1891-1921* (Washington D.C.: Princeton University Press, 1979) 145.

<sup>24</sup> Federico Zeri, ed., 39.

<sup>25</sup> Sidney Geist, *Interpreting Cezanne* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 62.

<sup>26</sup> John Rewald 313.

<sup>27</sup> A. Barskaia 93.

locale, and possibly specific paintings of Cézanne. Even the influence of Cézanne's brushstrokes can be seen in their directional movement in the tree foilage and their exposure in describing shadow, line and shape. The scale of the trees is also very similar to Cézanne. However, in Derain's *The Grove* (fig.12)<sup>28</sup>, *Tree-Trunks* (fig.13)<sup>29</sup> and *The Pine Tree*, one begins to notice a slight increase in scale of the pines in combination with absence of any people, buildings or other man-made structures. His palette is more limited, there is a greater emphasis on the pines themselves and they take on an almost animate power. The brushstrokes become even more varied and directional than Cézanne's, whose are more uniform and constant. Derain's strokes seem to take on a life of their own. They create shape and movement at the same time and seem to lend a sense of living vibrancy in the trees. A progression can be seen from *Footpath in Fontainebleau* to *The Grove* and onward to *Tree-Trunks*. The first seems most in the realm of Cézanne while Derain seems to go on to develop his own voice. In *The Grove*, the trees seem a bit stiff and solid. *Tree-trunks* show a sensuous movement in the curving tree branches and a sinuousness in the trunks. This work most relates to the piece in the museum. The treatment of sky and foilage is very much the same as is the whitened trunks. Possibly the white on the bottom of the picture is a road or path.

What is Derain's philosophy of painting and how does it take form? Derain writes to Vlaminck, "As for Claude Monet, [...] is he not right to use his fleeting, short-lived colour to render the natural impression that is only an impression and does not last, and can he not thus strengthen the characteristic quality of his painting? I would seek something different: that in nature which, on the contrary, contains something fixed,

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<sup>28</sup> A. Barskaia 109.

<sup>29</sup> A. Barskaia 125.

eternal, complex."<sup>30</sup> Apollinaire observes, "Only grand progressions of movement and unalterable masses count--that which has always existed, the timeless and elemental. There are no people or animals, and the palette is reduced to just a few colours, often mixed with black [...] Since an effect of spatial depth would work against the impression of timelessness, Derain constructs and arranges his elements closely together. Paths leading to the depths are suddenly truncated or obscured by rocks and trees. There is no background or atmospheric effect of depth. Derain visualizes near and far in a "spaceless" jumbling together of plastic forms that constitute the image."<sup>31</sup> This last part seems to describe *The Pine Tree*. The path in the bottom foreground abruptly turns and ends and the painting lacks a sense of true depth. And the "spaceless" jumbling of plastic forms describes the interplay of tree foilage with sky and could even refer to Cubism.

How does Derain's *The Pine Tree* relate to some of his former work? *The Pine Tree* can be placed with Derain's earlier work in that it may have been painted on site. "Derain belongs to that trend in French landscape painting which stems from the Barbizon school and develops in the art of Courbet, the Impressionists and Cézanne right up to the 20th c. art."<sup>32 33</sup> However, *The Pine Tree* differs drastically from Derain's earlier Fauve works coloristically. "Derain, like Vlaminck, had realised that direct colourism was not sufficient; on the other hand, neither was prepared to completely surrender to the new style, and Cézanne offered a way out, one which they

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<sup>30</sup> Institut Valencia d'Art Modern 114.

<sup>31</sup> Institut Valencia d'Art Modern 114.

<sup>32</sup> A. Barskaia 42.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Langdon, "Barbizon School [from OCWA]," (Oxford University Press, 2006) *Grove Art Online*. Online. Internet. 9 Apr. 2006. The Barbizon School was a group of 19th century French painters who took their name from a village on the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau. They did plein air painting (painting outside) and had a Romantic view of timeless nature.

enthusiastically took"<sup>34</sup> This change corresponds with the Cézanne retrospective after which Derain's work began to change dramatically away from the Fauve path he had pioneered with Vlaminck. "In contrast to the cheerfully decorative Fauve pictures, the effect produced by the landscapes painted in Cassis and Martigues in 1907 and 1908 is elemental and rough. They are strongly build, solid architecture, not Neo-Impressionist fantasies of light [...] he gives material strength by means of clearly defined contours. These elements do not correspond to geometry, as in Cézanne, but rather it is as if they have been roughly hacked out of blocks of wood with an axe."<sup>35</sup> This could especially describe the trees in *The Grove* (fig.9). The trees in *Tree-Trunks* and *The Pine Tree* are also very solid, yet they have more pliancy and seem to actively yield to the wind.

Where was *The Pine Tree* painted? The most stylistically similar (and closest in date) is *Tree-Trunks*. *Tree-Trunks* was done in Martigues in the south of France, not far from Marseille in c.1912-1913 (the location was written on the back of the frame).<sup>36</sup> In 1912 Derain lived in Vers on the river Lot.<sup>37</sup> In the summer of 1913 he was in Martigues.<sup>38 39 40</sup> Much of the work he did there was, "if not entirely, painted *sur place*--doubtless at that evening hour which so appealed to him. However, after his return to Paris in the autumn, he began to paint a number of forest scenes in the studio from memory."<sup>41</sup> It is likely then that *The Pine Tree* was either painted in Martigues or painted shortly afterward from memory. *Tree-Trunks* is so stylistically similar, especially in the

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<sup>34</sup> Denys Sutton 24.

<sup>35</sup> Institut Valencia d'Art Modern 114.

<sup>36</sup> A. Barskaia 125.

<sup>37</sup> A. Barskaia 109.

<sup>38</sup> A. Barskaia 109.

<sup>39</sup> Musée de Lodeve 59.

<sup>40</sup> Denys Sutton 28.

<sup>41</sup> Denys Sutton 28.

patches of foliage interspersed with sky, I would presume that *The Pine Tree* too originates from Martigues and even is inspired from the same grouping of trees. *Tree-Trunks* appears to be a side view of *The Pine Tree*. *Tree-Trunks* is dated 1912-1913 while *The Pine Tree* is dated 1913 on display at the Portland Art Museum. I believe that this sequence may be wrong. The file on *The Pine Tree* in the Portland Art Museum library lists the date as either from 1911-1914 or 1919-1922. His later landscapes veer stylistically from the ones he did between 1911 and 1913. They lack the strong Cézannesque influence and are more static in nature. Definitely this piece would fall in the same year as *Tree-Trunks* when Derain resided in Martigues. It would make sense for *The Pine Tree* to have been created right before *Tree-Trunks*. The progression from *Footpath in Fontainebleau*, 1911, which is very similar to Cézanne's works in this region, to *The Grove*, 1912, shows Derain taking charge of the landscape and making it his own through his stylization and sculpting of the trees. The transition from *The Grove* to *The Pine Tree* maintains Derain's ownership of the image and pushes it further by integrating an awareness of Cubism without being overtly Cubist, and creates a pliancy in the tree which allows it to mediate between the movement of wind and sky and solid earth. In *Tree-Trunks*, c.1912-1913, with serpentine branches that vigorously arch across the canvas, the primeval pine tree has evolved to claim total possession of itself.

## Conclusion

In conclusion I will summarize how I have contextualized Derain's *The Pine Tree*. I have shown Derain's interest in traditional museum art, his connection with well-known

contemporary artists, and his attendance at retrospectives, especially the Van Gogh, Gauguin, and most importantly, Cézanne. I have explained his connection and responses to Cubism, his deep personal study of Cézanne, and his own personal stylistic development in the evolution of his pine trees. I have noted his painting philosophy, how *The Pine Tree* fits in with his earlier work, and where it was most likely painted. I have also argued that *The Pine Tree* comes before *Tree-Trunks* in sequence and that they are the culmination of Derain's progression in Cézannesque landscape in which he transforms from mimic into an originator that has forged his own path.

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