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Montclair exhibit traces Cezanne's DNA in American art

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The Record

It's a familiar story in art: A new idea arrives from another culture and causes a flurry among the local artists. But few versions are more interesting than what happened when Paul Cézanne's abstracted naturalism arrived in America. Some Americans emulated him, some tried to merge their style with his, some couldn't get the hang of it and some did but pretended they hadn't borrowed anything.

The Russian-born American artist Max Weber was honest in his adulation. He wrote of his first exposure in 1906: "I said to myself as I gazed and looked ... 'this is the way to paint. This is art and nature, reconstructed.'"

Weber is one of 34 Americans whose works appear in a groundbreaking exhibit "Cézanne and American Modernism" at the Montclair Art Museum. The show is something of a triumph for a suburban museum, few of which have the clout or resources to do a show of this quality and scale. The museum's chief curator, Gail Stavitsky, worked on it for more than a decade, assembling 131 works from various collections, forging a partnership with the Baltimore Museum of Art (where many of the Cézannes come from) and putting together a first-class catalog packed with pictures and scholarly essays.

Cézanne was the seminal artist of

European modernism. His art inspired cubism and artists as diverse as Matisse, Mondrian and Modigliani. Picasso called him "my one and only master."

How did Cézanne's DNA get into American art? Many, like Weber and Maurice Prendergast, had been to Paris and seen the big retrospective organized in 1906, the year of Cézanne's death. Others saw works in the Paris salon of American writer Gertrude Stein and her brother, Leo. Some came back from abroad with photographic reproductions. Others saw shows here, such as the watercolors that were exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery and the Montross Gallery in New York. And many saw Cézanne in that famous avant-garde showcase, the 1913 Armory Show in New York.

Seeing the paintings that followed this exposure is like seeing a group of excited people trying to learn a new language. Some, like Morgan Russell and later, Arshile Gorky, did outright copies or close variations on the master's canvases. Russell's "Three Apples" is paired with the "Five Apples" by Cézanne that inspired it.

Cézanne often boldly left white, unpainted spaces in his pictures, a Zen-like gesture that can make landscapes or still lifes look like architectural diagrams. This can be one of the hardest parts of Cézanne's art to understand, especially in the watercolors, where gaps are

sometimes bigger than painted areas. Most of the artists tried a little of this, but not one did it convincingly. John Marin comes closest, but his watercolors, great as they are, use white space simply to air out his brushstrokes (and he was one who denied Cézanne's influence).

Prendergast picked up on another Cézanne hallmark: his chink-like brushstrokes. Next to Cézanne's methodical, form-building strokes, however, Prendergast's patchwork style looks merely decorative. Painters of Cézannesque still lifes invariably tipped the tabletop forward, a means of giving inanimate objects a sense of imminent movement. It also helped to flatten the picture, so that colors and shapes sat next to each other on the surface, rather than pulling apart into illusionary space.

Like Picasso with cubism, some of the artists pushed Cézanne's ideas to extremes, like Marsden Hartley's near-abstract crimson mountain pictures. More commonly, however, Americans like Leon Kroll tried to reconcile Cézanne with traditional representation in a style that might be called Cézanne Lite.

Given how far Cézanne was from photographic reality, it comes as a surprise

that he influenced photographers like Stieglitz and Paul Strand, who cropped and manipulated still life subjects to bring out their abstract shapes. Edward Steichen's gelatin silver print "Three Pears and an Apple" is so reduced, it looks like a charcoal drawing.

A few artists even have New Jersey connections. You can see Cézannesque paintings of Ridgefield by Man Ray and a precisionist treatment of the Paterson silk mills by Oscar Bluemner.

All in all, it took a while for the Americans to catch on. Few paintings here are equal to the Cézanne originals. Still, this is a thoughtful and interesting show and a reminder that when America eventually took the lead in the post-World War II era, it would be with an abstract style of painting that owed much to a seminal French modernist.

