The Status of the Mechanical in the Writings and Works of Two Artists: Cézanne and Matisse - The Artist as a Dysfunctional Machine

Marina Kassianidou

This paper looks at the work of Henri Matisse and Paul Cézanne in the context of the technological developments that were taking place during these artists’ lifetimes. In particular, the paper focuses on the parallels between the mechanical process and mass production and the works of the two artists. Both Cézanne and Matisse seem to perceive art as a form of mechanical process. Also, both artists adopt a form of mass production by their insistence on depicting the same subject matter over and over again. Interestingly, however, the parallel between mechanical developments and the work of the two artists eventually breaks down. Both artists face difficulties in trying to carry out their processes, and in the end they seem unable to achieve any finished product. The paper argues that Cézanne and Matisse use the mechanical framework as means of expression, but at the same time, they reveal the inadequacy of that framework when dealing with art.

In his “Notes of a Painter,” Henri Matisse states that “[a]ll artists bear the imprint of their time, but the great artists are those in whom this is most profoundly marked.” In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the time of Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse, industrial and scientific developments transformed the world into a system that could be analyzed and understood through science. The development of factories and the use of industrial processes in manufacturing goods led to the mass production of everyday consumer items. It seemed as if anything could be made available via a mechanical process. In light of Matisse’s claim that “all artists bear the imprint of their time,” one would expect to find this new mechanical process and mass production in the works of Cézanne and Matisse. Indeed, an interesting parallel can be drawn between the technological developments and the works of the two artists. Both Cézanne and Matisse seem to perceive art as a process in itself – as something they have to work their way through just like any mechanical process. Both artists adopt a form of mass production by their insistence on depicting the same subject matter over and over again. However, at some point, the parallel between mechanical developments and the work of the two artists breaks down. Both artists face difficulties in trying to carry out their processes; in the end they seem unable to achieve a finished product. They are rarely pleased with the result, so they keep returning to the same subject matter in an attempt to complete their processes and achieve the perfect artwork. Even their mass production is an illusion given that they depict the same subject matter in slightly different ways as opposed to creating exact replicas of their work. They become like dysfunctional machines that get stuck and keep executing the same thing over and over again, slightly varied each time, in an effort to get it right. Thus, Cézanne and Matisse bear the imprint of their time in that they use the mechanical framework as means of expression but more interestingly in that they reveal the
inadequacy of that framework when dealing with art – there is in fact no mechanical process that will make everything work.

For Cézanne, painting becomes a process of understanding and expressing one’s perception of nature. Cézanne sees the artist as someone capable of reconstructing nature in its true form. For him the artist becomes a builder. In fact, in one of his letters, he calls Michelangelo a “builder.” In most of his letters, Cézanne refers to his paintings as “experiments,” “studies” or as a “process.” These words suggest a scientific or mechanical process that he has to go through before he can yield what he considers to be a perfect product. In fact, Cézanne does not depict an object as he knows it but rather as it reveals itself to him through careful observation. Before painting a landscape, he breaks it down and studies its geological structure. In one of his letters he states, “Deal with nature as cylinders, spheres, cones, all placed in perspective so that each aspect of an object or a plane goes toward a central point.” He breaks down the landscape into simple forms and then strives to recapture it as an emerging organism. Thus, Cézanne is looking for a logical process through which he can realize nature on a canvas. He defines the role of the artist as someone that penetrates what is before him and perseveres in expressing himself “as logically as possible.” He sees art as a slow process, noting in one letter, “The reading of a model and its realization are sometimes very slow in coming.”

The process, or construction, that Cézanne goes through appears in his work. According to Schapiro, in Cézanne’s work one can “see the object in the painting as formed by strokes” where each stroke corresponds to a unique action. In a painting of Mont Sainte-Victoire (Fig. 1), Cézanne constructs the landscape out of brushstrokes and lines. He uses patches of colors to depict the various forms and planes. Every single brushstroke seems to assist the process of seeing. Cézanne would sometimes ponder for hours before putting down a certain stroke because, as Bernard said, each stroke must “contain the air, the light, the object, the composition, the character, the outline, and the style.” These careful brushstrokes organize themselves before the viewer’s eyes. In the painting, the sense of depth is created through the use of broad interlocked layers of color. In another painting of Mont Sainte-Victoire (Fig. 2), the slow transition from the vertical lines of the trees to the horizontal lines of the mountain, through many intermediate diagonal lines, creates a complex whole. The play of color contrasts is a delicate means of evoking a sense of depth. The contrast of warm and cool colors changes gradually from lively combinations of green, yellow and orange in the foreground to a distant and more harmonious combination of blue and pink. The complexity of the brushwork, with its countless directional changes, depicts the modeling of the objects in all their complexity. Cézanne is putting pieces together – putting perspective and color together to create a whole. He takes a complex nature scene and tries to find a process by which to realize it on the canvas.

Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire over sixty times from different angles and using different materials (Fig. 3, 4, 5). He kept producing images of the mountain repeatedly like mass-produced items. At the time, the advancement of engineering and factories allowed useful items to be widely produced. The availability enabled more people to share in the comfort of owning things and it led to the development of a consumer society whose main characteristic was the possession of material goods. Cézanne, in a way, is mass-producing his own work. He keeps returning to the same subject matter, maybe as an attempt to possess it – to recognize and understand all of its features and to get to know it intimately.

Like Cézanne, Matisse also understands painting as a process and as a construction. Matisse’s instructions to his students reveal his insistence on construction. He sees the human body as a form where every part is equally important. He asks his students to build the model “as a carpenter builds a house.” Interestingly enough, he uses the word “builder” to define an artist, just like Cézanne. He insists on the mechanics of construction and he gives different rules for dealing with drawing, sculpture and painting. In his “Notes of a Painter,” Matisse emphasizes that he needs to have a clear vision of the whole from the beginning. He sees art as a process, stating that he prefers to rework his paintings. He also describes a process of drawing a woman’s body by first giving it grace and charm and then by emphasizing the essential lines until he arrives at a more fully human meaning. Just like Cézanne, Matisse feels the need to define a process as he works through his painting. Art is not the work of an instant; instead it is a process that involves work and construction.

The construction in Matisse’s work is seen through an actual transformation of motifs. The central reclining nude in Joy of Life (Fig. 6), with her arm over her head, reappears in The Blue
Nude (Fig. 7) and in his sculpture Reclining Nude (Fig. 8). He wants to take the figure out of the picture plane and perfect it in a way that only he can imagine. He converts it from a part of a group, as depicted in Joy of Life, to a single detailed figure occupying the whole canvas in The Blue Nude. Then he proceeds to turn it from a two-dimensional painting to a three-dimensional statue. It is almost as if he is going through a mechanical process – first he comes up with an abstract conception of the product, as shown in Joy of Life. Then, he chooses a focus and sketches it in more detail, as in The Blue Nude. Finally, he creates the tangible, three-dimensional model. He takes the subject matter and transforms it through different materials. The transformation from sculpture to painting and vice versa is reminiscent of a mechanical process where the engineer moves from a paper sketch to a three dimensional implementation of the object. Thus, Matisse is working almost like an engineer.

Matisse also shares in Cézanne’s repetitive nature. The same nude figure from Joy of Life, in addition to being transformed into a statue, appears in about nine other paintings as a still life ornament. We see it in Still Life with Pewter Jug and Pink Statuette (Fig. 9) as a little ornamental statuette. Then it reappears in Goldfish and Sculpture (Fig. 10). Also, this same figure appears in Large Reclining Nude (Fig. 11) in a slightly different position. Matisse, like Cézanne, cannot escape his subject matter. He is trapped in the need of producing more of it and in the need of capturing it and understanding it. The fact that he depicts the same figure repeatedly reveals a special connection with the figure – it reveals an obsession with his subject matter and a need to see it transformed into something more than a mere image. Matisse seems to be visualizing his subject matter from all angles and all sides.

However, there is a problem with Cézanne and Matisse’s mechanical processes. In an ideal mechanical process, the goal is realized and the process eventually ends. In mass-productions, the products are identical – replicas of the one perfect end result. This is not the case with Cézanne and Matisse, as there is never an end to their processes. Both artists are dissatisfied with the end result of each of their processes. They keep working on their creations, hoping that this time they will get it right.

Cézanne notes in one of his letters, “The painting proceeds willy-nilly. Sometimes I am quite carried away, and more often I am sadly disappointed.” 22 In yet another occasion he puts off sending a painting to the Salon because he is unhappy with the final result. 23 In his letters, Cézanne repeatedly mentions how difficult and painful the process of painting is. He constantly reminds his readers how slowly he is progressing in his studies. He is often dissatisfied and frustrated, which could explain the many times he paints the same subject. It is all part of a process to realize the perfect end result. However, that day never seems to come, and in his letters we see a constant dissatisfaction with his work and a need to continue working on his process. Like Cézanne, Matisse states that even though he might be satisfied with work completed in a single sitting, he will soon tire of it. It will no longer please him so that he will have to rework it. 24

Both Cézanne and Matisse seem unable to complete their processes. It is understood that in an industrial process, the end result will be a finished product ready for use. In the case of the artists, the finished product would be a painting ready for exhibition. For Cézanne, the notion of the unfinished is literal in that he does not finish all of his paintings and he sometimes leaves white unpainted spaces on the canvas. In one of his watercolors of Mont Sainte-Victoire (Fig. 4), most of the canvas is left untouched so that the image appears transparent. There are missing parts and holes in the painting that qualify it as an unfinished product in a world of finished goods. For Matisse, the fact that he keeps going back to the same subject matter, the reclining nude, and depicting it over and over again for wide use, means producing the same thing over and over again for wide use. Cézanne, however, is not producing the same thing. He depicts the same object in a slightly different manner, suggesting his inability to actually achieve a finished product. Cézanne’s mass-production is a production of fragments of the same product. All the paintings
taken together give a more complete picture of the subject matter.

The same is true for Matisse’s work. His depictions of the nude complement each other in that they all appear as parts of the same object. In The Blue Nude the viewer sees the figure on her side and in Large Reclining Nude she sees her on her other side (Fig. 7, 11). In Reclining Nude the viewer sees her from all sides as a three-dimensional object (Fig. 8). Because these figures are only slightly different, they come across as the exact same object interpreted in different ways. They are not mere replicas of the original, but they are parts of the original. They reveal new aspects of the original figure. The construction is an ongoing one and the figure keeps developing through Matisse’s work.

The relationship of the artists with the mechanical process is an ambivalent one. They seem to be willing, whether it is consciously or unconsciously, to use the mechanical as means of expression. They use it as a framework for structuring their views on art and their artistic techniques. However, the artists are not perfect machines and the process does not work as planned. The record gets stuck and we keep hearing the same tune. Only it is not the exact same tune. The artists’ will to achieve their goals, despite their limited means, enables them to create different images of the same thing. Their will enables them to interpret their subject matter in a unique way. By appearing to be dysfunctional machines they demonstrate that notions like the perfect finished product may, in fact, not exist – in the world of art, everything may be an experiment that can be studied and developed but never completed.

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The images mentioned in this paper may be found in the following sources:


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