

Paul Cézanne

The Card Players, 1892-1895

This small work is one of the many versions that Cézanne painted on a theme which interested him for a number of years. He began the **Card Player series** in 1890, modelling his figures on farmers observed in Aix-en-Provence. However the artist's interest had nothing to do with rural life or with social or symbolic elements; rather he aimed to depict the game as it plays off his work's rigorous composition. The first representation of the series (today at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia) portrayed five figures, of whom only three playing cards, and employed a wider palette of colours as well as a multitude of curving lines. In this version, by contrast, the artist's emphasis on the psychological competition between the men connotes an attention to all aspects of life that involve a two-way exchange.

The **strongly geometrical composition** confers a classical dignity upon the two figures. There is no folklore in the telling of the scene but rather a **vital tension** and possibly even a **dark meditation on human existence**.

Balanced Forms

Cézanne constructs the space according to a **grid of lines**: the horizontal axes can be seen in the plane of the table and in the edge of the window while perpendicular verticals are echoed between the table legs, the bottle, and – on the left – the card player's chair and the tablecloth's folds. Inside this compositional scheme the artist situates diagonals in the form of the short white line of the tobacco pipe and the folds in the tablecloth (right) as well as of the card players' bent arms. The whole scene is placed slightly off-centre, as can be seen in the bottle and the table which separate the two men but are shifted slightly towards the lower right-hand side of the painting. The distortion is visually counterbalanced, however, by the window in the upper left. In this way Cézanne achieves

centrality while maintaining a completely credible gaze on a scene taken from real life.

Intersecting Relations

In spite of his attention to realism, Cézanne has used an **abstract approach** to the composition, as can be seen in the work's **symmetry** and **specular character**.

The player on the left, in a blue-toned coat and yellow pants, seems made up of hard cylinder shapes as seen in his hat, pipe, torso, and forearm. By contrast the man on the right, in a yellow coat and blue-toned pants, seems composed of soft triangles, which are repeated in the hat, the jacket that widens towards the bottom, the arrangement of his arms as well as in the shape of his face. The only other colour on the canvas surface is brown, which takes on an ochre hue when Cézanne depicts the table and its cloth, the window's fixtures and the two men's faces. Indeed the whole work seems based on lowering the tones of the three basic colours: blue, yellow and red.

The paint is applied in small brush strokes, sometimes isolated and out of place, such as in the bottle highlighted by a line of light, or the simple stroke of brown that describes the sunken eye of the card player on the right.

A Mental Painting

As we have seen, all elements of the work converge to describe the two men's relationship, which is characterized simultaneously by opposition and exchange. Thus the painting renders **not just an "impression", but also a description of the action's inner meaning**. In this way the work seems to **communicate the essence of an experience** which, almost solidified and given the form of memory, is destined to last in the mind's eye.



Fig. 1, 2 Paul Cézanne,
The Card Players, 1892-1895.
Oil on canvas, 47x57 cm.
Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

Below: compositional diagram.

