

# Imperishable Sensations

Soutine's Portraits: Cooks, Waiters and Bellboys,

The Courtauld Gallery

Cézanne Portraits

National Portrait Gallery

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Soutine: The Valet, 1927



Cézanne: Mme Cézanne in Blue, 1888-90

The 38 bus is infamous. You get no buses at all and then a stream of them come along, one after another. Infuriating and mysterious are the ways of London transport.

These two extraordinary portrait shows – each of them a very rare treat on their own – are on in London at the same time, and in their very different ways they illuminate the very complex and profound act of making a portrait of a fellow human being.

Chaim Soutine arrived in Paris in 1913, seven years after the death of the great Cézanne. He was an impoverished Jewish immigrant from Russia, now Belarus, and in a mere 21 paintings this important, small but perfectly formed show makes a “painter’s painter” accessible to a public that is much more familiar with the great Cezanne, who is represented here by 50 portraits.

The two artists tell us different versions of the same eternal truth. On the surface - and surface is so important in this comparison - they are opposites. Intemperate, emotionally uncontained, Soutine was the consummate outsider in the Paris of the 1920's. Until the mid-1920's when the collector Albert Barnes bought 50 works and lifted Soutine out of penury, the painter was more comfortable hanging with the working classes, using waiters, bell hops, servants and chambermaids as his models.

His explosive expressionism and angry, noisy use of paint is violent. He smears the paint with his fingers. The paintings are visceral. Like his hero Rembrandt, Soutine kept animal carcasses in the Montparnasse studio and the deep rich glaucous vermilion of flesh and blood in his portraits reminds us that we are fragile, vulnerable, and mortal. His existential philosophy was shared by his great friend Amedeo Modigliani, dead at 36 in 1920 and soon to be seen at Tate Modern. The subject of a future blog!

Cézanne tells us another, but equally compelling version of this same truth. His chalky, dry, austere, rigorous, stripped down asceticism is clear-eyed and very quiet. He places the paint on the canvas like a careful plasterer. Where Soutine shouts, Cezanne whispers. They are equally audible. Equally strong.

Like Soutine, Cézanne's portraits are of his social circle and they are anchored in a sense of place. But Soutine, the displaced Russian émigré, was an alien in Paris, whilst there are deep roots, patrician detachment and even a privileged hauteur in Cézanne.

If there is anger - and we know of Cezanne's profound alienation from his banker father, his illegitimate son Paul, his subsequent hidden marriage to Paul's mother Hortense - little of his discomfort in the haute bourgeoisie of Aix is on display. His work exudes a powerful sense of identification with the rich atmosphere of Provence. He paints his friends, his family, and his employees peacefully in his elegantly furnished studio surrounded by antiques and statuary and ceramics. He is working in his home town, on a private income, with little interference. And yet oddly enough it seems that each artist is a mirror version of the other, as though seen through a glass darkly.

Each artist paints the sensation of feeling and the sensation of seeing and the sensation of being.

“Sensations form the foundation of my work and they are imperishable I think.”

*Paul Cézanne, in a letter of 15 October, 1906*

*#soutine #courtauld #cezanne #portraits #nationalportraitgallery*