

1.2 Anatomy of a masterpiece: the non-finite in Cezanne and Turner

Objective

Every image, however realistic, is a personal interpretation of reality. It is always the product of an observer who looks at something from her/his point of view. The result is always an invention. The goal of this exercise is to understand that simplifying equates to choosing, interpreting, and inventing.

Background

How do we perceive the unity of the experience without being blocked by the details? Turner and Cezanne propose two methods:

Turner wanted the observer's eye to wander on the surface of the painting without encountering resistance and to slide from colour to colour, absorbing its nuances and contrasts (Fig. 1.2a). For this purpose, he did not use sharp lines to delineate objects and resorted to fuzzy boundary to merge the elements of the painting in a continuum of colours and shapes.



Fig. 1.2a - Turner, *Eruption of Vesuvius*, 1817

Cezanne depicts a forest with a mountain at the bottom using a minimalistic tessellation of colours (Fig. 1.2b). The painting almost 'wants' its observers to fill the gaps with their own imagination. Both artists want the observers to be engaged and to make sense of their experience.



Fig. 1.2b – Paul Cezanne, Landscape

The purpose of simplification is not to eliminate elements from reality, but to build an artificial world that can help us unravel the deep structure of reality.

When we summarize a text, for example, we proceed in the same way. We do not remove words at random, but we produce a completely new and more compact text in the attempt to grasp the meaning of the original content.

Instructions

The exercise consists of comparing the paintings by Cezanne and Turner and in answering to the following questions:

- To which graphic elements do these artists resort to simplify reality?
- Can you find analogies between these artistic approaches to simplification in the design of products you are familiar with?
- What do these different paintings have in common? What are the differences?