A more radical application of these ideas about modern art occurs in the work of Paul Cézanne, another graduate of the Salon des Refusés. For a brief analysis of the trajectory of his paintings, read this article from the WebMuseum site.

Here is an early painting by Cézanne, a portrait of his father from 1866, three years after the first Salon des Refusés. It is obviously representational because we can identify virtually every element in the image as an object corresponding to things in our three-dimensional space: the old man and his silly cap; the newspaper rumpling in his hands; the overstuffed easy chair; the painting on the wall, done by Cézanne himself; the open doorway, through which we see a piece of furniture glowing in the dark; the floral carpet on the floor and the pool of light from a window or French door (we can discern the shadow of its mullions). Cézanne thus attempts to handle light in a somewhat naturalistic—if not photographic—way; consider the cast shadows, for instance, of the shoes and the chair, which create the illusion of volume.

At the same time, the painting fails to convince us that we are in fact peering through the picture plane at real things in real space. Something disturbs the illusion. The many critics of the original Salon des Refusés spotted it right away and simply dismissed Cézanne’s works as poorly painted.

Look at that misshapen chair, they would say; the angle of the front does not match the angle of the side, and so it looks twisted, lopsided, collapsing under the father’s weight.

Speaking of the father, they would continue, exactly how is he supposed to be sitting in this chair? From the waist up, his back does not correspond to the chair back; from the waist down, he seems to float above the seat cushion, and thus his weight cannot be crushing the chair at all. His elbows are close but not in actual contact with the armrests. In fact, his shoes are the only things in physical contact with their surroundings, thanks to the blackest shadow imaginable. Much too black, in fact. The painter must have prepared too much black paint and then had to use it all up before it spoiled.

And now that we are looking at the shoes, notice how the floor tips up at us, as if laid at a steep angle and not flat. It makes the viewer a bit queasy to look at it too long. That rear wall is precisely parallel to the picture plane, shutting off any real sense of perspective. The whole image is curiously flat, the colors unnatural, the shapes clumsily conceived.

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1 See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 369–374.
If Monsieur Cezanne could only draw, his chair would look convincing; if he had any artistic talent at all, his colors would gleam with a believable illumination.

Sadly—his contemporary critics would conclude—here is a man with far more ambition than talent. Not even second-rate. He simply cannot paint.

These contemporary critics and classicists could not help comparing Cezanne’s portrait to paintings like those of Jean-Auguste David Ingres, whom we just met in the *Turkish Bath*. Compare the portrait of Cezanne’s father to this portrait by Ingres painted only ten years earlier. Marie-Clothilde-Ines de Foucauld—let’s call her *Madame Moitessier* for short—is obviously a woman of considerable means. In addition to the sheer wealth of her possessions—the Chinese vase, the gilt frames, the glass mirror, the chandelier, the lush upholstery of the lounge chair, the gold and precious stones of her jewelry, the equally jewel-encrusted fan lolling indolently from her left hand, and the incredible fabric of her gown—her bearing is self-assured, if not aristocratic. Madame Moitessier is also accustomed to eating well, no mean feat for the nineteenth-century.

Were we able to say anything like this about Cezanne’s father based on the portrait? For instance, is he a wealthy man or a poor man? Does he sit in a nice clean house like Madame Moitessier or in a musty old shack with a single chair? What is the man like—self-assured or shy? Does he eat well or is he hungry most of the time? These are important questions about the handling of the subject. If you had this portrait of Madame Moitessier, could you recognize her in the street or at the train station? Most likely. Could you recognize Cezanne’s father anywhere but on a misshapen chair and holding a newspaper? Doubtful. In other words, if Cezanne’s portrait of his father doesn’t much look like him and doesn’t much tell us anything about the kind of person he is, is it really a portrait at all?
Part 2

Judging by the accepted standards for painting at the time, the critics would have been right to dismiss Cezanne as a bad painter. We may be tempted to say the same thing. Before we judge his picture too harshly, however, we should remember that there are many painters and critics like Matisse who tell us Cezanne is a better and more important artist than Ingres. Let’s take a closer look.

The image still falls somewhere between a human face and a shriveled apple, at least as far as traditional portraits go... The surface seems crudely painted, to say the least. It is difficult to judge—for example—if the mouth is deformed, twisted, or somehow simply mispainted. In fact, the paint keeps getting in the way of our seeing the father’s face. Much of the paint has been plastered on with a palette knife rather than daubed or scrubbed on with a brush. The thickness is especially obvious in the collar, a slab of heavy lead white oil paint, but if you look carefully at the face, the cheek and brow reveal signs of the attack. The technique can get messy, as in the vigorous smears on the back of the chair. The paint looks less like upholstery and more like—well, oil paint. Applied thickly. With a palette knife. On linen canvas. In other words, the painting method interferes with the illusion that the image is not a painting.

Let’s look closer at the portrait by Ingres too. Although the resolution is low on a computer screen, we can see telltale signs of paint in Cezanne’s portrait. Let’s look especially for the same signs on the portrait of Madame Moitessier.

Still no signs of paint... We know for a fact that Ingres painted this portrait, but—like the painters considered in Theme 2 and Theme 3—the surface is painstakingly devoid of evidence. From the proper viewing distance, the surface seems flawless, creating the illusion that we really are looking through transparent air at a world beyond the picture frame. Ingres builds up his image slowly, carefully, through layers of glazes and thinly applied paint. Compared to the hard edges of Cezanne’s portrait, Ingres shows everything softly, smoothly rounded to heighten the illusion of three-dimensional space, using the same sfumato technique as Leonardo. In a word, the painting looks nearly photographic in its detail, while retaining that roundness and depth we see using both eyes. The talent and technical skill needed to pull this off, are truly impressive. A non painter would have no idea how the master achieved such effects.

What, then, would account for the entirely different portrait painted by Cezanne? The painter may actually lack the talent and skill of Ingres. Or he may have in mind two of the principles Janson set forth earlier:

- the right to paint for aesthetic effect alone
- the elimination of representational content—especially emotive content—to focus attention on the pictorial structure itself
Why should paintings not look painted? Why is naturalistic illusion the be-all and end-all of painting? How did it become the essence of painting in the West? Such questions took on particular importance with the development of photography in the nineteenth century. If painting was no longer necessary to reproduce a naturalistic likeness of people, places, and things, what should be its role? Why should it continue to exist?

If a painting like Cezanne’s tells us far more about the man who painted it than about the man who sat for the painting, then in a sense it is not so much a portrait of Louis-Auguste Cezanne reading the L’*Evenement* newspaper, as it is a portrait of his son Paul painting.