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Brick by Brick

Paul Cézanne's *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence*

ANDRÉ DOMBROWSKI

> The Old Masters had assumed that the members and joints of pictorial design should be as clear as those of architecture.
>
> —Clement Greenberg, "Cézanne," 1951

More directly than any other elements in Paul Cézanne's Provençal landscapes, the bricks, cut stones, and roof tiles of *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence*, dating to about 1885–87 (figs. 70 and 71), express a potential equivalence between the represented object and its pictorial incarnation. By design, one brick is almost equal to one "constructive stroke," and his outlines are not unlike the mortar that binds bricks together. The pile of bricks or stones on the ground to the left of the house, for instance, or the remains of a wall to its right, seem to have offered Cézanne those rare moments in painting when a unit of the world and a unit of his means of representation merge, when one "block" of paint can reach out to the real and become something as concrete and singular as one brick.[1] The collapsed bricks constituted a pictorial motif demonstrating that his coordinated and seemingly coherent strokes (which nonetheless always threaten to dissolve into the merely random) can lay claim to a singular entity of the world of matter and experience—whether a sensation or a brick—as their point of origin. But because a brick has an actual physical shape and particularity that matter and experience lack, it becomes a special metaphor for Cézanne's painting, and one, I hold, that he very much intended. What material, after all, could be closer to paint than clay, especially in Cézanne's region, where the local ground was literally made over into paint? Wrested from the earth, liquefied as paint or, in its hardened, transubstantiated form, made into bricks, this clay embodies more broadly Cézanne's interest in the indivisibility of culture and nature.

There are many designations for Cézanne's signature technique of applying more or less discrete units of paint in several small, somewhat parallel strokes: "dab, touch, comma, wedge, pellet, blot, lozenge, cell, particle, pellicule, atom, atomic unit, molecule, corpuscle"—the list is from Kathryn Tuma's evocative analysis of the meanings of the atom for Cézanne's late brushwork.[2] But perhaps the most persistent have architectural reverberations: the "constructive stroke" especially, even though Theodore Reff hardly explored the
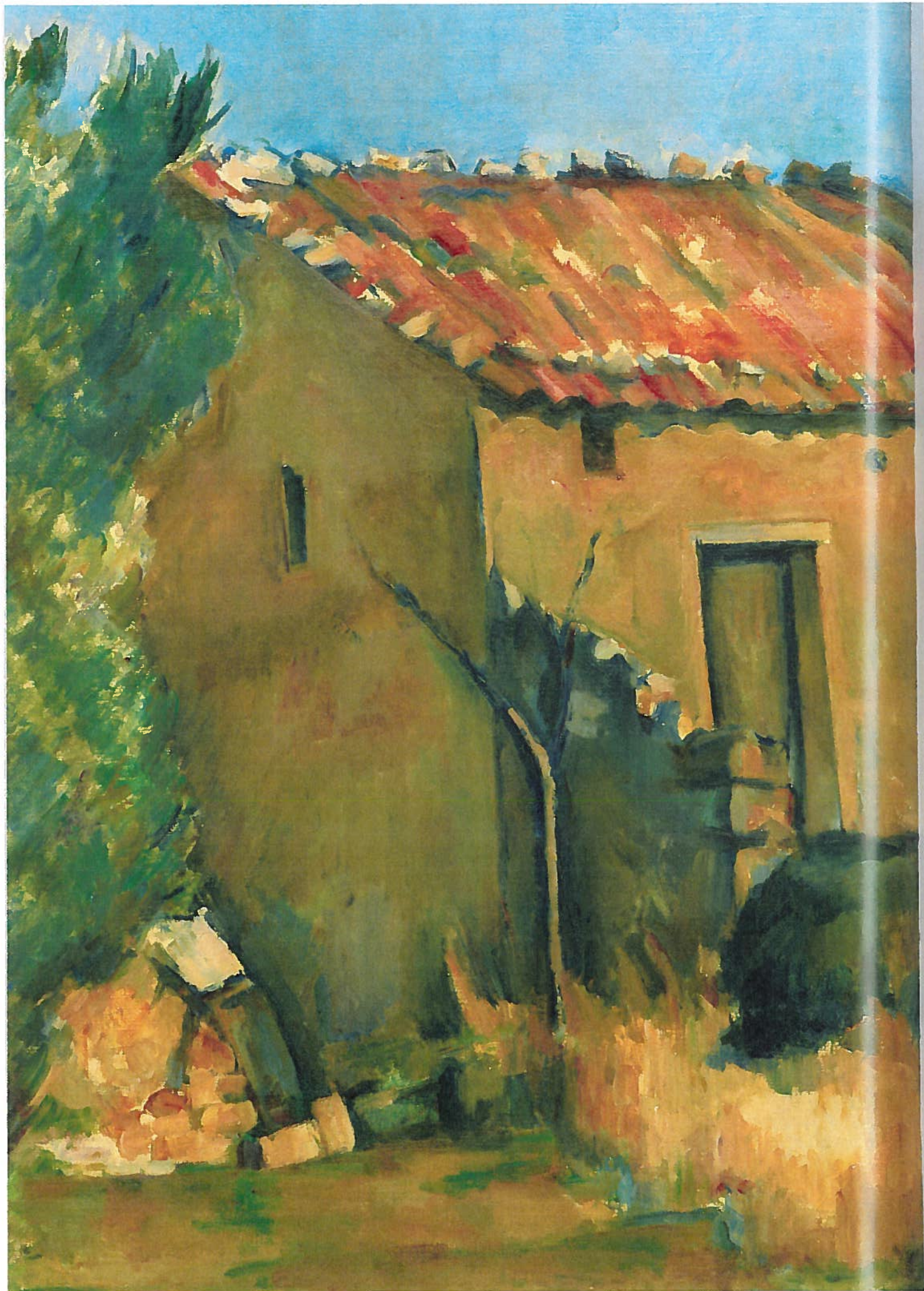
architectonic resonance of his enduring terminology.[3] That Cézanne built up his compositions stroke by stroke, that he managed to achieve the illusion of volume through a structural assembly of flattened pictorial units, is perhaps another commonplace of the critical literature that is rarely perceived as metaphor: "You can really see what's happening: Pissarro's embroidery, Cézanne's brick-and-mortar," exclaimed Holland Cotter.[4] Richard R. Brettell, in his usual prescient manner, makes a similar point: "Cézanne used brushwork called the 'constructive stroke' to build his composition; these vertical and diagonal strokes were applied in groups, as if they were pictorial 'bricks.' In this way, both the subject of the painting and its pictorial language relate to architecture."[5] The quotation marks Brettell places around the word *bricks* are indicative, manifesting his slight unease about the literalness and prosaic nature of the metaphoric equation he seeks to establish.

If the atom offered Cézanne the figure of the invisible and unknowable structure of matter and the real (as posited in Tuma's convincing study: "The great and tragic paradox of the figure of the atom, as allegory of material endurance and support, is that it gives itself to us only in the immediacy of nature's evanescent, impermanent, temporally dissolving forms"),[6] then the brick stands perhaps as the atom's countermetaphor. As metaphor, bricks certify—just as the atom once put the nature of reality and painting the visible into doubt—the ways in which construction and architecture pretend to control the chaos of matter, to harness the formless into that structure we call

culture. For all the "uncontainability and irrepresentability of sensation" that Cézanne's brushstrokes embody (these again are Tuma's evocative words), for all the ways in which his strokes "begin with an assuredness, but then . . . drift toward the bottom, repeating themselves like a manual stutter,"[7] there are also those few instances in his work in which the material thing and its condensed rendition in paint seem to share a confident and didactic unity.

To be sure, Cézanne's whole system or formula (if that is what indeed he can be said to have developed) does not rest on those exceptional moments in which signifier and signified fuse. Nor does the emphasis on such equivalences in Cézanne's prophetic work bolster an account of assured paint application as so many modernists would claim. Clement Greenberg, for instance, spoke of Cézanne's strokes as having an "abiding, unequivocal character as a mark made by a brush."[8] I propose, instead, to underline the variety of metaphors Cézanne's technique itself can be said to contain besides references to the properties of the canvas, the motif, or the sensory effects of the represented world. In fact, *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence* should be considered a special exercise within Cézanne's landscape practice in which he allowed his constructive strokes an expressly obvious relation to the historical technologies of the construction they represent. Drawing a parallel to contemporary debates in architectural theory about the universal laws and meanings of form depending on material and method, he could advance his own early formalist means of representation. A decrepit house—beside referencing abandonment and death and gradually disappearing back into its landscape—could then also carry more positive associations and pictorial opportunities, not least in revealing the building's basic structural units, such as bricks and stones, disassembled and deconstructed, as if by history itself.

There are several distinct ways in which bricks, stones, and tiles figure in a painting such as *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence*. For instance, the two distinct bricks resting at the front of the pile on the left are each composed of several terracotta-colored strokes, made in various directions; they have a dark red side, and a bit of green seeps into them from below and from above (fig. 72). Traditionally modeled, they seem fully formed as two solid blocks nesting side by side, an illusion possible only through a variety of small yet distinct touches and shadings of the brush. Elsewhere, terracotta-colored paint refuses to coalesce into form: see the far end of the same pile of bricks and stones, once our eyes have moved slightly to the left, or the large heap of

FIGURES 72 AND 73
Paul Cézanne, *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence*, 1885–87
Details of figure 71

terracotta color that sits in the middle ground of the painting just below the partial wall to the left of the door, where no distinct bricks can be discerned (fig. 70). Whole rows of vertical brushstrokes in lighter and darker shades describe this area—a mass, an obstacle—but not the specific elements from which it is assembled. Here, the dark and vivid greens and blues that surround this pile of stones and earth make it appear more as a void than a presence.

Included within this diversity of pictorial treatments for bricks and stones, at the center of the pile on the left side of the house (fig. 72), we find, too, an area where brick and brushstroke appear almost united, the integrity of a pictorial unit (as representing one brick) only minimally tinkered with. Cézanne turned this pile into a showcase for three different modes of his pictorial illusionism, enforcing the brick's metaphoric richness: an indistinguishable mass of bricks; some more-traditionally modeled, three-dimensional bricks; and his unified "bricks-as-strokes." This pile of bricks or stones is a crucial focal point, especially because it is also one of the brightest areas of the entire painting and thus draws the viewer's attention. Still, the exercise reaches out from here into the rest of the canvas: the constructive strokes that make up one brick can be found elsewhere in the image, on the roof and on the remains of the wall at the opposite side of the house, where each side of a roof tile or brick appears to have been made with more or less a single stroke (fig. 73).

We would be hard pressed to find other instances in Cézanne's oeuvre in which signifier and signified are as proximate as the brick and the constructive stroke are here. For this equivalence to function in Cézanne's painting, establishing the correct separation between painter (or viewer) and the pictorial motif is everything: the bricks had to be at a fairly precise distance from the painter. Other depictions of old, abandoned structures in
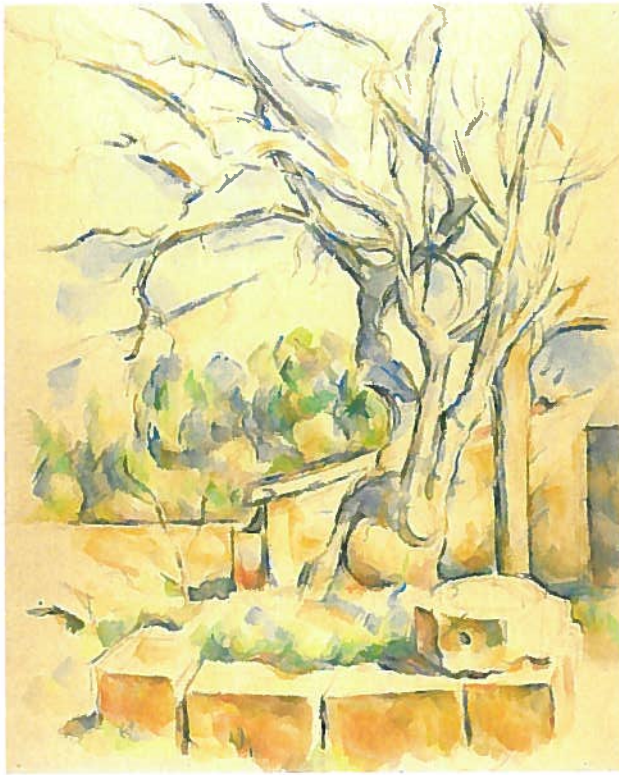
the Provençal landscape that Cézanne had painted between the late 1870s and the early 1890s do not share this vantage point. In most of the other canvases of this type—*House in Provence* (fig. 74),[9] *The Pigeon Tower at Bellevue* (1890, Cleveland Museum of Art),[10] *The House with the Cracked Walls* (1892–94, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art),[11] or his *Houses in Provence—The Riaux Valley near L'Estaque* (c. 1883, Washington, National Gallery of Art)[12]—the houses stretch farther away from the putative observer, and thus their stones or bricks become units of the world (such as leaves or pine needles) that are too small and distant for his brush to attend to individually. The few exceptions include *The Abandoned House* (c. 1878–79, private collection)[13] and the watercolors he executed of a pistachio tree in the courtyard of the Château Noir (fig. 75),[14] in which walls made of fairly large stone boulders occupy the foreground. In both instances, however, the stones are so close to the painter that their size demands that they be built up sedimentally through a multitude of strokes. *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence* is thus a landscape in which the building has more prominence than usual, squatting in the center of the image and allowing for little else within the canvas, except a bit of sky above and a few bushes to the right and left. We even seem to be heading straight for the door at the center of the painting, although this route is blocked by small mounds and disintegrating walls. In *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence*, that is, the painter gives the encounter between world and paint a special phenomenological correspondence, providing a more evocative site of identification and habitation than he does in other landscapes of this type.

Bricks were certainly ubiquitous in Cézanne's Provence, both as reality and as metaphor, and they played a special role in traditional Provençal architecture as well as in the region's industry. The South of France, long a Roman stronghold, had a more sustained tradition of brick usage for building than most other regions of France. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, in his influential *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture*

française, pointed to the unusual preference for brick over stone: "This part of the Languedoc [Toulouse] was more or less the only region of France where stone is almost completely absent, and the architects of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries chose unreservedly to erect their buildings in brick, not using stone except for window transoms, columns, and some isolated points of support. . . ."[15] For Cézanne, the meanings of the brick as a pictorial metaphor were thus geographically and culturally coded, in line with his other archaeologies of the histories and traditions of "his" land, Provence. This was also true for Antony Valabrègue who describes, in the poem "Le Pigeonnier," the local pigeon towers, which Cézanne also painted, as emblems of the region's vernacular architecture: "In the shadow of the old chestnut tree / That envelops the courtyard of the castle / The farmhouse raises its pigeon tower / Made out of painted brick."[16] Moreover, Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer has noted that the most prominent industries in L'Estaque, near Marseille, were brick and tile factories, which grew dramatically in scale during the latter part of the nineteenth century.[17] The factory chimneys that are so distinct in Cézanne's views of the Bay of L'Estaque are thus emblematic of the region's production of construction materials.

Another painter of Cézanne's day, Adolph Menzel, self-consciously deployed the bricklayer and bricklaying as metaphors for his own realist endeavors. According to Michael Fried, Menzel "imagines the painting itself . . . as a construction site, perpetually open to revision,"[18] a conceit evident in several of his paintings, drawings, and prints that focus expressly on bricks and roof tiles:
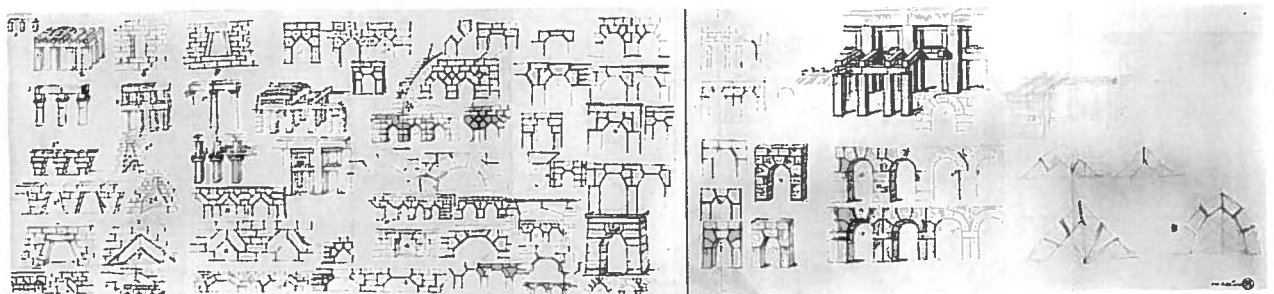
> The emphasis of the drawing [*Backyard of the Puhlmann House near Potsdam*, fig. 76] falls on the rows of shingles rather than on the brickwork, but in both what is striking is not simply the regularity and repetitiveness of the depicted elements but also the suggestion, which becomes more distinct the longer we look, of the "originals" of those elements (and those rows of elements) having been laid down one after another over a period of time; indeed we become aware of the depicted shingles on the roofs nearest us having been *drawn* one after another, which further identifies the operations in question with the act of drawing itself.[19]

Menzel's example demonstrates that, by the time Cézanne's constructive stroke emerged, the brick had already served as a principal metaphor for artistic process, that a "picture," in a realist and impressionist conception, would be assembled unit after unit (and those units distinguishable from the next, yet interwoven into the flat whole of the canvas). The metaphor was therefore ready to be adopted by Cézanne, whose paintings, like Menzel's drawings, seek to demonstrate the links between their facture's temporal duration and the making of a brick wall, which consists, after all, of bricks laid down one after the other, row after row, almost marking the time of their production in, and as, their very structure.

To be sure, Cézanne did not embrace the metaphor as wholeheartedly as, perhaps, did Menzel. There are no bricklayers at work in Cézanne's oeuvre as there are sometimes in Menzel's. Instead, in *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence*, we see an old house decomposing, brick walls disintegrating. The brick emerges once more out of its prior context within a building as the single concrete unit of which it was made. But its reemergence is attended by a sense of loss, decomposition, and collapse, marking the inherent limit, even inadequacy, of the brick as metaphor for the brushstroke. In a painting such as *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence*, we might see that "Cézanne was prepared for a too easy analogization of the stroke with" a brick.[20]

The brick, however, also served Cézanne as an indicator of his art-as-architecture, one that privileges form as an effect of its literal materiality. Cézanne's paintings, more than the works of any other painter of his day, have often been taken as evincing the modernist impulse to strip bare the material support of their visual illusions. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that that modernist impulse took hold in the nineteenth century first and most prominently in architectural theory and practice, with attempts to understand architectonics through material construction. Cézanne could indeed reach back deeply into his century's conceptions and principles of architectural construction. For example, Karl Friedrich Schinkel's experiments in revealing architecture's own aesthetic language—a visual vocabulary drawn from its material history—made bricks the crucial, if not the primary unit and generative principle of a building. In his famous *Langes Blatt* (or *Long Sheet*), which shows designs for masonry of various wall openings and was intended for a projected but never finished textbook on architecture that dates to the early 1820s (fig. 77), Schinkel laid bare the myriad ways that the choice of brick and cut stone not only affects a building's stability but also reveals, if the materials are left exposed, the very processes of construction itself. Schinkel devised a visual grammar of brick masonry that reduces "the diverse history of

architectural form to a set of fundamental structural morphemes linked into sequences of progressive complexity,"[21] and he was among the first to develop a conventionalized language of architecture that was drawn from its means of construction, thus providing the utilitarian aspect of architecture its own aesthetic validation.[22]

Schinkel's theories were later developed and popularized by Gottfried Semper, who also emphasized a truthfulness to materials, an honest expression of a building's structural principles, and above all the dependence of architectural form and typology on social practices. Especially in the second volume of his influential *Style* (1863), Semper insisted on the legibility of architecture as a function of social customs and techniques of construction, which, for him, were premised on craft—all modern forms of architecture emerging from the earliest principles of carpentry (*Tektonik*) and masonry (*Stereotomie*), as well as from ceramics and textile making.[23] Even though Semper's theories were popular in France, it is most likely that Cézanne first encountered the centrality of bricks (and more broadly the idea of material expressivity) as a functional aesthetics of architecture in the writings of Viollet-le-Duc:

> Construction, for the architect, means the use of materials with regard to their inherent qualities and proper nature, with the preconceived idea to satisfy a need through the simplest and most solid means; to give to the built structure the appearance of durability and suitable proportions subject to certain rules imposed by common sense, reason, and human instinct. The methods of the builder must indeed vary in accordance with the nature of the materials, the means at his disposal, the requirements he has to satisfy, and the society in whose midst he is born.[24]

For Viollet-le-Duc—I can give here only the most cursory summation of his thought—the history of structural systems in all their particularity could be derived from a study of the increasingly effective use of materials and an

FIGURE 78
Illustration of masonry,
Eugène Viollet-le-Duc,
Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle, 1854–68
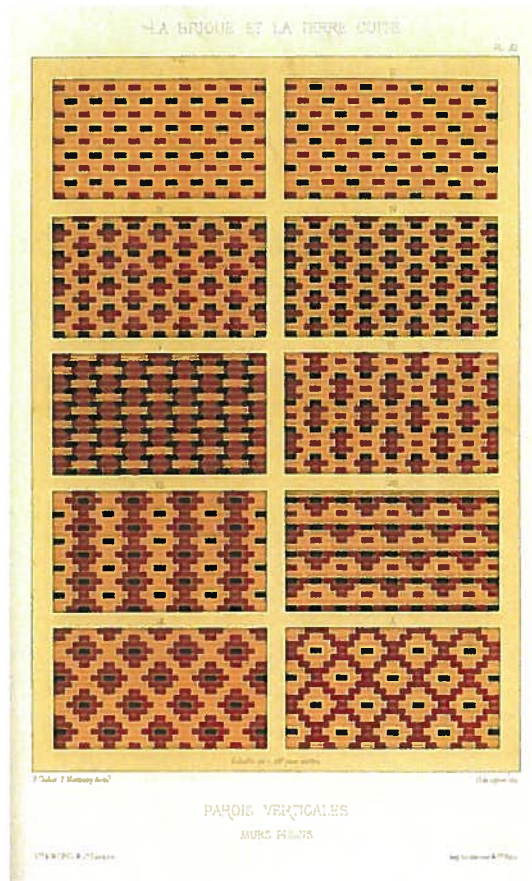
PAROIS VERTICALES
MURS PLEINS
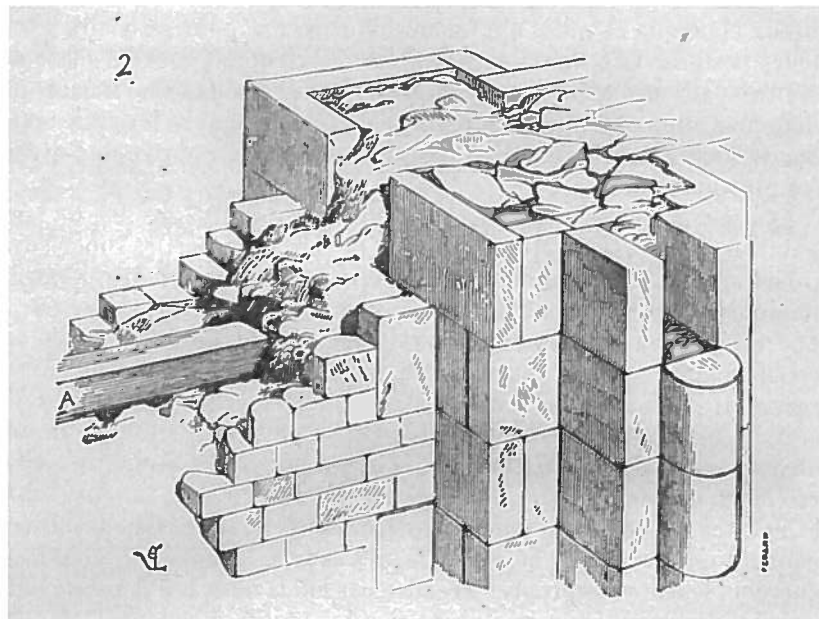
FIGURE 79
Patterns for solid brick walls,
Pierre Chabat, *La Brique et la
terre cuite . . . ,* 1881

ever more reasoned understanding of balanced forces. Ascribing a progres-
sively more rational and functional value to all parts of a building, so that
"each form arises as a logical solution to a structural problem," with the result
that "good form is always the succinct expression of function,"[25] he included
several illustrations of brick and stone masonry that showed the intricate fu-
sion of construction and design throughout history (fig. 78). Cézanne might
have learned from them that the flatness of a wall (or a canvas) can acquire
"style"—and be made meaningful—precisely as a function of the units that
compose it, what Hubert Damisch called Viollet's "modern structuralism."[26]

In the decade during which *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence* was painted,
the most spectacular treatment of the brick may, perhaps, be seen in the lav-
ishly illustrated set of portfolios *La Brique et la terre cuite* by the architect Pierre
Chabat, first published in 1881.[27] Most of the plates show various types of brick
buildings, including restaurants, hospitals, and some structures from the
world's fairs in Paris, but they start with a set of details and motifs of brick
patterns for walls and floors (fig. 79). The nineteenth-century use of colored
brick was unprecedented in its variety, perhaps unsurpassed since, but the
real importance of the plates for our purposes lies in their demonstration of
a simple system of laying down equal units—one after the other, one next to
the other—that is at once endlessly variable and capable of an infinite array
of new visual effects. I am not proposing that Cézanne understood his "con-
structive strokes" literally as bricks or his canvas as a brick wall, but that the
brick—as well as the relation between structure and aesthetic celebrated by
late nineteenth-century architecture—is a potent model for precisely what his

signature technique sought to achieve. At once singular and multiple, always one in an assemblage of many, bricks had the capacity to lend Cézanne's brushstrokes, sometimes quite literally, sometimes more metaphorically, a stability and durability that was his answer to impressionism.

In the early 1890s, toward the end of his preoccupation with abandoned houses in the Provençal landscape, Cézanne embarked on *The Basket of Apples*, an ambitious still life of apples and a bottle (fig. 80).[28] As far removed from the realms of architecture and landscape as the still life at first appears, bricks are centrally placed within it. One props up the basket itself to the left, providing it with its odd angle. Cézanne chose to leave this functional device visible, and the brick sticks out in its squared-off simplicity within a painting filled with round shapes and crumpled folds. And there are other bricks in the painting: the tabletop itself seems to be standing on two piles of them, as the blocky shapes in the lower left and right indicate. Cézanne even placed one of his rare signatures precisely on this brick shape to the left. There is, furthermore, the famous stack of ladyfingers, which have been laid like bricks in four rows of two. Cézanne's anxious treatment of the borders of things—and the outlines of his apples perhaps especially—are here not unlike mortar, which simultaneously binds things together and keeps them separate. The result of these choices is a canvas structured by a simple architectonic order. It evinces an emphatic belief in construction as painting and painting as a constructed language. The brick is essential to the illusion that is Cézanne's art: it serves both as an element *in* painting and a metaphor *of* painting, a realization that *Abandoned House near Aix-en-Provence* helped prepare.

I would like to thank Heather MacDonald, Richard R. Brettell, and Eric Zeidler for the invitation to participate in this volume and for their expert editorial guidance, and Frances Bowles, David Brownlee, and especially Jonathan D. Katz for the several iterations of this essay they helped sharpen.

1. I use *brick* as the central metaphor throughout the essay, encompassing other base units of construction such as cut stone or tile. Given how similarly Cézanne represented them, it is often rather difficult to discern the difference between stone and brick unless we know the specific house he chose to paint. On the history and culture of bricks, see Campbell 2003 and Guiheux 1985. For a widely read late nineteenth-century history of brick masonry, see Davis 1884.

2. Tuma 2002, 62. On Cézanne's brushstrokes as metaphor, see also Clark 2001, 93–113.

3. Reff 1962, 214–27.

4. Holland Cotter, "The Innovative Odd Couple of Cézanne and Pissarro," *New York Times*, June 24, 2005.

5. Brettell 1995, 91.

6. Tuma 2002, 78.

7. Ibid., 62–63.

8. Greenberg 1951/1961, 55.

9. See Rewald, Feilchenfeldt, and Warman 1996, no. 573: *Maison devant la Sainte-Victoire, près de Gardanne*.

10. Ibid., no. 692: *Pigeonnier de Bellevue*.

11. Ibid., no. 760: *La Maison lézardée*.

12. Ibid., no. 438: *Maisons en Provence—La Vallée de Riaux près de L'Estaque*.

13. Ibid., no. 351: *La Maison abandonnée*.

14. On the series of watercolors showing this motif, see Conisbee 2006, 214–15.

15. "Cette partie du Languedoc [Toulouse] étant à peu près la seule contrée de la France où la pierre fasse complètement défaut, les architectes du XIIIᵉ et XIVᵉ siècles prirent franchement le parti d'élever leurs édifices en briques, n'employant la pierre que pour les meneaux des fenêtres, les colonnes, et quelques points d'appui isolés. . . ." (Viollet-le-Duc 1854–68, vol. 2, p. 250).

16. "A l'ombre du vieux marronnier / Qui du château couvre l'enceinte, / La ferme dresse un pigeonnier / De brique peinte" (Antony Valabrèque, "Le Pigeonnier," in *Petits poèmes parisiens* [Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1880], 95; cited in Athanassoglou-Kallmyer 2003, 131).

17. Athanassoglou-Kallmyer 2003, 108–109; see also Serrano 2006, 122–36, and Dombrowski 2006, 21–26.

18. Fried 2002, 154; see pp. 259–65 for further discussion of this point. I thank Jeremy Melius for the reference.

19. Ibid., 156–57.

20. Tuma 2002, 70.

21. Bergdoll 2000, 192; see also Bergdoll 1994, 180–86 and 193–95.

22. On Schinkel's textbook and theories, see Haus 2001, 344–47.

23. Semper 1863.

24. "Construire, pour l'architecte, c'est employer les matériaux, en raison de leurs qualités et de leur nature propre, avec l'idée préconçue de satisfaire à un besoin par les moyens les plus simples et les plus solides; de donner à la chose construite l'apparence de la durée, des proportions convenables soumises à certaines règles imposées par les sens, la raisonnement et l'instinct humains. Les méthodes du constructeur doivent donc varier en raison de la nature des matériaux, des moyens dont il dispose, des besoins auxquels il doit satisfaire et de la civilisation au milieu de laquelle il naît" (Viollet-le-Duc 1854–68, vol. 4, p. 1). On Semper's and Viollet-le-Duc's theories of construction, the dissertation by Charles Davis is especially helpful; see Davis 2009.

25. Mallgrave 2005, 126, 130.

26. Damisch 1978, 19.

27. Chabat 1881, which has been partially reprinted as Chabat 1989; see also Chabat 1875–78.

28. See Rewald, Feilchenfeldt, and Warman 1996, no. 800: *La Corbeille des pommes*.