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TEACHERS’ EVENING
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17.45 – 18.45
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Booking essential: joff.whitten@courtauld.ac.uk Tel. 020 7848 2705

STUDY DAY:
CÉZANNE’S CARD PLAYERS IN CONTEXT
Sat 11 Dec 2010, 10.30 – 16.15
Join us to explore the making and meaning of these celebrated masterpieces, look at Cézanne’s treatment of the human figure and investigate the image and representations of peasants in 19th century French Literature.
£35 (concessions £30)
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IN THE MAKING
Paul Cézanne’s five Card Players paintings have long been considered as some of his most important and iconic works. The series was a major undertaking and, unusually for the artist, he made a significant number of preparatory works, including drawings, watercolours and oil studies.

There are very few contemporary accounts which illuminate Cézanne’s approach to producing his Card Players compositions, or indeed that reveal the order in which they were painted. This exhibition has provided a rare opportunity to undertake a technical and scientific study of the materials and techniques Cézanne used in creating these engaging works; one that provides fascinating insights into his unconventional approach to drawing and painting.

Many scholars have thought that Cézanne began with two multi-figure groups before moving on to three paintings that showed only a pair of card players. The multi-figure groups are now in the collection of the Barnes Foundation and the Metropolitan Museum, and the two-figure compositions now belong to the Musée d’Orsay, The Courtauld Gallery and a private collection. In each instance Cézanne was thought to have gradually refined his compositions reducing their scale in order to produce the smaller, simpler canvases.

These judgments – based on stylistic grounds – assumed that Cézanne worked against conventional 19th century painting practice. More usually, artists gradually increased the scale of their compositions. But new evidence suggests that, while still moving from the multi-figure groups to the two-figure versions, Cézanne was perhaps not quite so different to his contemporaries. Like them, it seems, he too worked from smaller to larger works.

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DRAWING AND PAINTING
Cézanne used farm labourers from his family estate at the Jas de Bouffan in Aix-en-Provence to model for his Card Players paintings. Interestingly, however, none of the studies show them arranged as a group. It is likely, then, that Cézanne posed his models separately and brought them together as pairings and groups, working freely on the actual canvases.

Cursory preparatory drawing in pencil or charcoal is visible beneath the paint layers of the finished Card Players paintings when they are viewed under infrared light (fig. 1). This reveals that the artist did not rely solely on pencil strokes to outline his compositions; more often he painted lines with a brush to map out the initial contours. Frequently blue ultramarine paint served for this purpose. Cézanne then filled in the spaces with thicker patches of colour.

Traces of this painted drawing are sometimes visible in gaps between forms (fig. 2 and cover image).

Cézanne also made revisions on the canvas, as is seen by comparing the pencil underdrawing for the left-hand figure in the Metropolitan Museum’s Card Players (fig. 4) with the preparatory watercolour study of this figure (fig. 5).

Initially, Cézanne drew the bottom of the sitter’s jacket lower down the thigh, with the edge of the jacket curving up towards the torso. This outline matches the curve of the jacket in the watercolour study (fig. 5), but he decided to change its length and shape at a later stage.

However, at other times, the artist seems to have been less confident. The pencil lines marking out this sitter’s fingers and knuckle are vague; this could be from the lack of detail on the equivalent hand in a study which may have served as a guide. Sometimes, when an area proved particularly challenging, Cézanne may have made an additional study before embarking on a new Card Players composition.

RE-THINKING THE SEQUENCE
The artist’s under-drawing and his use of the individual figure drawings and watercolours challenges conventional ideas about the order in which the Card Players canvases were made. The hands and cards of the figure in a blue smock in the Metropolitan Museum’s Card Players (fig. 3), a work usually thought to post-date the Barnes canvas, for example, are entirely incomplete: a problem that may have prompted him to produce a watercolour (fig. 6) in an attempt to resolve the issue.

Interestingly, in the Barnes canvas, the detail did not seem to cause Cézanne a problem, which may suggest that he produced the Metropolitan painting at the very outset of the series, before progressing to a larger composition.

Moving on to the two-figure paintings, infrared images of pencil underdrawing beneath the paint layers of the Musée d’Orsay picture indicate that Cézanne worked out its composition in pencil to a much greater extent than in The Courtauld Gallery version. The latter work shows only loose painted lines beneath the concluding paint layers, perhaps because he had already practiced this arrangement of figures on previous occasions. This evidence suggests that the Musée d’Orsay picture might not be the final work of this group of Cézanne’s Card Players, as was thought previously, but rather the first.