

Eclecticism as Innovation: From the Carracci Brothers to Cézanne

Sifang Luo^{1*}

¹ School of Fine Arts, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

Email Address

luosifang2024@163.com (Sifang Luo)

*Correspondence: luosifang2024@163.com

Received: 2 December 2025; **Accepted:** 23 December 2025; **Published:** 13 January 2026

Abstract:

The development of art history is a continuous process of progress, with innovation regarded as its core driving force. Eclecticism can also be seen as a form of innovation—one that is more stable than traditional innovation. In the late 16th century, the three Carracci brothers founded the Accademia di Bologna, and the artistic tendencies and educational philosophy of this academy fully embodied “eclectic perfection”. Paul Cézanne, known as the “father of modern art”, broke the layers of shackles of traditional art and opened up unlimited possibilities for the development of modern art. His innovation was also the result of eclecticism. Based on this, there is an urgent need to establish an in-depth understanding of the eclectic form of multi-fusion, so as to enhance the comprehension of art theory and provide certain inspiration for art studies.

Keywords:

Eclecticism, Innovation, The Carracci Brothers, Cézanne

1. Introduction

The concept of “innovation” has long been at the forefront of art historical discourse, often associated with radical ruptures—movements that reject the past to forge unprecedented paths, from Caravaggio’s gritty realism to the avant-garde experiments of the 20th century. Yet this narrow framing overlooks a quieter, more enduring form of innovation: eclecticism, the deliberate synthesis of diverse artistic traditions to create something new. For centuries, eclecticism has been dismissed as a passive act of imitation, a compromise rather than a creative force. This misunderstanding has obscured the profound impact of artists who embraced eclecticism as a deliberate strategy—none more so than the 16th-century Carracci brothers and the 19th-20th century master Paul Cézanne.

The Carracci brothers’ Accademia di Bologna, founded in 1582, emerged at a pivotal moment in Renaissance art, when Mannerism’s decorative excess and Caravaggism’s anti-classical realism stood in stark opposition. Their “eclectic perfection”—a philosophy of selecting and integrating the strengths of classical masters and contemporary schools—offered a middle ground that preserved technical rigor while embracing emotional resonance. Three centuries later, Cézanne, often

hailed as the “father of modern art”, pursued a similarly eclectic path: merging the structural order of Poussin, the color experimentation of the Impressionists, and the direct observation of nature to redefine the boundaries of painting. Though separated by time and context, both the Carraccis and Cézanne demonstrate that eclecticism is not a lack of originality, but a dynamic process of reconfiguration—one that balances continuity with transformation.

Existing scholarship has largely treated the Carraccis’ academic eclecticism and Cézanne’s modernist innovations as separate phenomena. Studies by Denis Mahon and Anne Summerscale have defended the Carraccis against charges of rigidity, while Roger Fry and Richard Shiff have celebrated Cézanne’s role as a bridge between tradition and modernity. Yet few works have explicitly linked their practices to argue for eclecticism as a coherent, transhistorical form of innovation. This gap leaves unresolved a critical question: how can a mode of artistic production rooted in borrowing and synthesis be understood as innovative?

This paper seeks to address this question by analyzing the eclectic practices of the Carracci brothers and Cézanne. It first examines the historical context and educational philosophy of the Accademia di Bologna, exploring how its synthesis of drawing and color, classical idealism and sensory appeal, redefined academic art. It then turns to Cézanne’s artistic development, tracing his engagement with masters ranging from Poussin to Pissarro and his reimagining of their techniques through a modern lens. Finally, it interrogates the shifting evaluations of eclecticism across centuries, arguing that its perceived value is shaped by the artistic ideals of each era. By highlighting these two case studies, this paper aims to reframe eclecticism as a stable, impactful form of innovation—one that enriches our understanding of art history’s evolution and offers insights for contemporary artistic practice.

2. The Carracci Brothers and the Accademia di Bologna

In 1582, Annibale Carracci, Agostino Carracci, and Lodovico Carracci co-founded the Accademia di Bologna. They leveraged their respective strengths to manage the academy jointly. The academy had its own educational philosophy derived from the Latin phrase *contentione perfectus*, meaning “eclectic perfection”.

2.1. The Background of “Eclecticism”

At the end of the 16th century, the trend of establishing art academies prevailed in Italy. Alongside the Accademia di Bologna, other art academies founded around the same period included the Accademia del Disegno in Florence and the Accademia di San Luca in Rome. However, when we mention academic art academies today, the one founded by the Carracci brothers comes to mind first—it best reflected the development of art education at that time and laid the foundation for the teaching systems of art academies in later generations.

In the late stage of Renaissance art development, Mannerism emerged, which imitated the style of earlier masters but only captured their form without retaining their spirit. Meanwhile, Caravaggism emerged as artists sought new paths due to the extraordinary achievements of earlier masters. At that time, Italy was home to numerous competing art schools. These schools clashed not only in style but also in artistic goals. Mannerism, exemplified by artists like Parmigianino, prioritized exaggerated proportions and decorative elegance over emotional depth—creating works that dazzled visually but lacked the spiritual resonance of High Renaissance art.

Caravaggism, by contrast, rejected classical idealism entirely, focusing on gritty realism, dramatic chiaroscuro, and mundane subject matter that challenged the church's preference for grand, sacred themes. Caught between these two extremes, the Carracci brothers recognized a gap: artists needed a path that honored the technical rigor of the Renaissance masters while embracing the emotional and sensory appeal of contemporary styles. The founders hoped to preserve the classical art tradition and cultivate new artistic talents through such educational institutions. This initiative also received support from the Vatican, creating favorable conditions for the prosperity and development of art academies. The Vatican's support, moreover, was not merely symbolic—church patrons sought art that balanced piety with aesthetic sophistication, and eclecticism allowed the academy to produce works that satisfied both religious doctrine and the nobility's taste for refinement. This alignment of artistic vision and societal demand solidified the academy's role as a unifying force in Italian art.

The choice of “eclecticism” was partly to cater to the specific aesthetic needs of the upper class, the church, and the nobility. On the other hand, this eclectic approach allowed the academy to attract more students with diverse artistic styles and tendencies. The Accademia di Bologna, with its strong inclusiveness and multi-fusion characteristics, cultivated and influenced a large number of artists, such as Bocchi, Caricci, Albini, and Massari.

2.2. The “Eclecticism” in Art and Educational Philosophy

The three Carracci brothers advocated learning the styles of classical masters in art and actively adopted popular models in school operation—they then innovated and integrated these models, making the approach highly feasible.

In the Italian art scene at the end of the 16th century, artists who advocated learning from earlier masters basically held one of two tendencies. One group emphasized drawing while neglecting color, following outstanding High Renaissance masters such as Michelangelo and Raphael; the other focused on the color expression represented by the Venetian School, with Titian as its leading figure. These two distinct tendencies later became known as the “debate between drawing and color” in art history. The Carracci brothers absorbed both: they valued the technical precision and rational nature of drawing, while also advocating the study of color and fully affirming the sensory enjoyment it brings to viewers. As Agostino Carracci wrote in his sonnet:

*Whoever wishes to be an excellent painter,
Must master the drawing of Rome,
The movement and chiaroscuro of Venice,
The calm colors of Lombardy,
Michelangelo's grand style,
Titian's life study skills,
The tranquility and dignity of the Correggio school,
The exquisite composition of Primaticcio,
And the ease and elegance of Parmigianino.[1]*

This sonnet embodies clear “eclectic” ideas and articulates the academic art concept. By absorbing the strengths of classical masters—such as Michelangelo's human

figures, Raphael's drawing, and Titian's use of color—and integrating them into their own practice, the Accademia di Bologna distinguished itself from Mannerism and Caravaggism. Mannerism was a conservative tendency that overemphasized form, while Caravaggio pioneered a new realistic style. The Accademia di Bologna stood between them in artistic philosophy, achieving a balanced middle ground.

The Carracci brothers also had unique insights into educational philosophy. Prior to this, Vasari founded the Accademia del Disegno (“Academy of Design”) in Florence. Modeled after the educational approach of the Medici family, this academy served as a new guild organization, breaking the old guild restrictions on sculptors, architects, and painters. When this academy declined, Zuccari proposed a series of measures to reorganize academic education, advocating the separation of teaching and administrative functions and emphasizing the enhancement of its educational role. Vasari mainly emphasized the representative role of art academies, while Zuccari focused on their educational functions—together, they defined the two core tasks of future art academies. The Accademia di Bologna absorbed both of these tasks and embarked on a new path of innovation. [2]

At the Accademia di Bologna, copying and life drawing were the core and foundation of formative training. Students mainly copied works of earlier masters to continuously strengthen their ability to depict human anatomy. Meanwhile, free life drawing sessions with human models were also valued by the academy. The Accademia di Bologna inherited the traditions of previous academies and prioritized the study of artistic human anatomy. In addition, the academy actively offered courses in humanities, social sciences, and art theory—this was what truly distinguished the academy from workshops, and its artistic concepts gradually gained wider recognition. For instance, students like Guido Reni—one of the academy's most renowned alumni—underwent rigorous training that began with copying Michelangelo's anatomical sketches, then progressed to studying Titian's color layering techniques in life drawing sessions. Reni's later work *The Assumption of the Virgin* embodied the academy's eclectic spirit: it featured the grand compositional structure of Raphael, the luminous color transitions of the Venetian School, and the emotional restraint of classical art—proving that the academy's educational model could nurture artists who synthesized diverse influences into a distinct personal style. Additionally, the academy's emphasis on humanistic studies set it apart: students studied philosophy and classical literature alongside painting, enabling them to infuse their works with intellectual depth. As Malvasia noted in his biography of the Carraccis (trans. Summerscale), the academy's goal was not to produce “carbon copies of masters” but to cultivate artists who could “select, adapt, and reimagine”—a philosophy that made eclecticism a dynamic, creative process rather than passive imitation.

The Accademia di Bologna introduced innovations in both artistic and educational philosophy, and this innovation was a crystallization of drawing on the strengths of diverse schools and integrating multiple influences. It was precisely this integration that allowed the Accademia di Bologna to stand out among many contemporary art academies.

3. Cézanne's Artistic Ideas

Paul Cézanne was a French artist at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Separated from the Carracci brothers by about three centuries, he seemingly had no connection to them—but they shared common ground in “eclecticism”. Unlike the

Carracci brothers, who explicitly pursued “eclecticism”, Cézanne’s artistic ideas embodied this principle in every aspect.

3.1. Cézanne’s Choices

Cézanne was born in Aix-en-Provence in southern France. At the age of ten, he studied painting under Joseph Villevieille, a traditional painter—but Cézanne’s artistic path was destined to be full of creativity.

Cézanne had a great interest in copying. He often visited the Louvre and the Palais de Chaillot to study and copy works there. He learned from the paintings of Poussin, Rubens, and the Venetian School, applying their techniques to his own creations. At the same time, he drew inspiration from the works of earlier masters such as Delacroix, Daumier, and Courbet.

Among the numerous artists and styles in the art world, Delacroix, Poussin, and Pissarro exerted the greatest influence on Cézanne. Delacroix was a representative of Romanticism; the strong passion and love for art in his works inspired Cézanne deeply. Cézanne even planned to create a painting titled *The Apotheosis of Delacroix* (Figure 1)—a work that fully demonstrated his admiration for Delacroix. He also studied the works of Poussin, whose style differed from Delacroix’s, and mastered the stable structure in Poussin’s paintings—even surpassing Poussin in some aspects. The French scholar Michel Hoog commented: “Cézanne reached the most poetic humanistic creative realm of Poussin. In Poussin, he saw a powerful lyrical force under self-control. He integrated the emotions he felt in the face of natural scenery into the discipline of Poussin’s landscape paintings”. [3] While Cézanne learned from the first two masters through copying, Pissarro personally taught him a set of creative methods and guided him patiently, helping him transition from the Romantic period to a focus on nature. In 1872, Cézanne copied Pissarro’s work *Louveciennes* (Figure 2), reproducing the scenes and figures in the painting with adjustments to composition and color tone.



Figure 1. Paul Cézanne, *The Apotheosis of Delacroix*, Oil on Canvas.

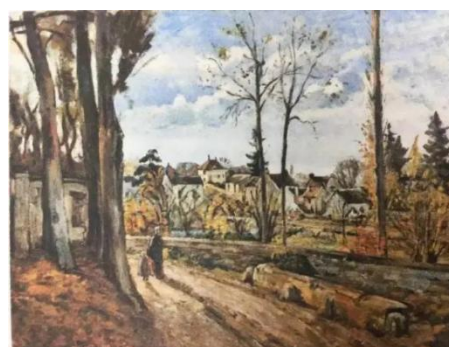


Figure 2. Paul Cézanne, *Louveciennes*, Oil on Canvas.

Cézanne once said: “Redo Poussin from nature”. This meant that Cézanne wanted to paint directly en plein air (in nature), as the Impressionists did, while striving to convey the sense of order and formal beauty that defined Poussin’s work—a concept reflected in many of Cézanne’s creations.

3.2. Cézanne’s “Eclectic” Idea

Cézanne's "eclecticism" was first reflected in his attitude toward the relationship between tradition and Impressionism. He inherited traditional painting's focus on form, adopted realistic techniques and perspective principles, and absorbed the structure and order in the classical master Poussin's works. However, he did not embrace Poussin's purely classical themes and forms; instead, he brought this stability and order into the natural world pursued by the Impressionists, remedying the "disorder" in Impressionist paintings. As he himself stated: "The shapes of nature always present the effects of spheres, cones, and cylinders."

Cézanne pursued works of art with "eternal" significance. This "eternity" was neither the pure rationality of Classicism nor the sensibility of Impressionism. How to unite the two? How to strike a balance to achieve "eternity"? These were the questions that preoccupied him. For example, in his later series Mont Sainte-Victoire (Figure 3)—created around his hometown—his repeated brushstrokes were full of uncertainty: each stroke seemed independent yet harmoniously unified within the overall painting, with loose and broken contour lines. The artist sought to merge rational structure with personal will into an "eternal" vessel, achieving the perfect integration of color and line, nature and painting.

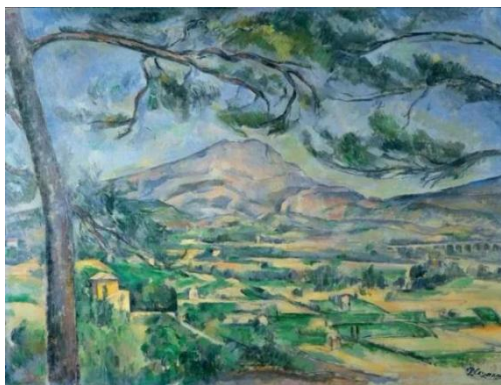


Figure 3. Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, Oil on Canvas.

Cézanne's art was a harmonious unity of subjectivity and objectivity, content and form, image and abstraction. He would compose and color objects according to his own understanding of their structure. When depicting traditional themes, Cézanne did not blindly pursue realism; instead, he used new forms such as cool-warm color contrast to serve the content. In representing specific images, he was not confined to realistic reproduction but attempted to simplify them into combinations of geometric forms—cylinders, spheres, and cones. Cézanne's art was not only a reinterpretation of nature but also a challenge to tradition. Precisely for this reason, his influence on modern art was immense. He was like a polyhedron: artists of later generations could draw on different aspects of his work, leading modern art to develop in diverse forms.

Paul Cézanne was an artist with a strong sense of innovation. His innovation was "eclectic"—rooted in his own experiences and inseparable from his understanding and reflections on art. Many regard Cézanne as the founder of Cubism and Abstract Art in the early 20th century, but this may not have been his original intention. His theory never strayed from reality; he used abstraction as a means to convey the essence of things.

4. The Debate on “Eclecticism”

In the 18th century, Winckelmann first used “Eclectic” to describe the painting style of the Carracci brothers. Since Winckelmann affirmed the brothers’ contributions, the term “eclecticism” carried no negative connotations when first applied to them. However, in later references, the Accademia di Bologna was often framed as the opposite of Caravaggism and a symbol of rigidity. The “eclecticism” of the Carracci brothers was dismissed as a lack of innovation, while Cézanne’s art—though marked by the same “eclectic” traits—was never labeled as such, and its influence was entirely positive. This discrepancy must be understood within the context of specific historical eras.

There were numerous reasons for this disparity. For instance, John Ruskin, a renowned 19th-century British art historian, abhorred the Bolognese School. He argued that the works of these so-called eclectics lacked sincerity, even denouncing Annibale Carracci as “the scum of Titian”. [4] This dragged the reputation of the Accademia di Bologna to its lowest point. In contrast, 19th-century French critic Théophile Gautier offered a more nuanced view, acknowledging that the Carraccis’ eclecticism “preserved the flame of classical art when it might have been extinguished by extreme styles”. Gautier’s praise, however, was overshadowed by Ruskin’s vocal condemnation—reflecting the era’s preference for “originality” over synthesis. Meanwhile, 20th-century art historian Denis Mahon challenged this bias, arguing that the Carraccis’ ability to “synthesize without homogenizing” was a greater innovation than the radical breaks of Caravaggism. This spectrum of opinions highlights how eclecticism’s value is shaped by the artistic ideals of its time. At the time, art scholars and critics held divided opinions on the academy, which inevitably shaped later evaluations of it. As for the Carracci academy’s value and innovativeness, contemporary audiences and scholars have developed their own frameworks for judgment.

The “eclecticism” of the Accademia di Bologna can indeed be regarded as a form of innovation. Firstly, eclecticism entails breaking conventions. In fields like art, traditional practices typically adhere to a single style, method, or concept. Eclecticism, by contrast, combines different elements once deemed irrelevant, creating a new visual and spatial experience. This unconventional fusion is innovation in itself—exactly as embodied in the artistic concept advocated by the Accademia di Bologna. Secondly, eclecticism fosters new aesthetic experiences. When diverse styles, cultural elements, or media are integrated, new aesthetic values emerge. Viewers must adopt new aesthetic perspectives to appreciate these integrated works, and this fresh engagement is an innovative outcome of eclecticism. Finally, eclecticism sparks new creative approaches. In the process of synthesizing various elements, artists uncover new modes of expression and possibilities. For example, Annibale Carracci’s work *Bacchus and Ariadne* (Figure 4) blended multiple styles: it bore the bold colors and vivid vitality of the Venetian School, alongside the grand composition and robust depictions of human figures reminiscent of Michelangelo.

From the Carracci brothers to Cézanne, both embraced a more stable and subtle form of eclectic innovation. When reflecting on “innovation” in art history, we tend to think of groundbreaking movements like Caravaggio’s Realism and Delacroix’s Romanticism. Yet we should also acknowledge these more understated forms of “eclectic” innovation. Artists do not exist in isolation; they possess subjective initiative, integrating their own insights with the legacy of predecessors to forge new

styles. More often than not, it is these hidden innovations that drive the evolution of art.



Figure 4. Annibale Carracci, Bacchus and Ariadne, Oil on Canvas.

5. Conclusions

This paper argues that eclecticism, far from being a passive or derivative practice, constitutes a distinct and enduring form of innovation—one that balances continuity with transformation. The Carracci brothers' Accademia di Bologna and Cézanne's artistic revolution, separated by three centuries, converge in their deliberate synthesis of diverse traditions: the Carraccis merged classical drawing rigor with Venetian color vibrancy to redefine academic education, while Cézanne united Poussin's structural order with Impressionist spontaneity to bridge tradition and modernity. Their practices demonstrate that innovation need not entail rejecting the past, but rather reimagining its connections to the present.

The divergent evaluations of their eclecticism—dismissal for the Carraccis, acclaim for Cézanne—reflect the shifting cultural values of their eras, yet both confirm eclecticism's capacity to drive artistic evolution. Denis Mahon, a pioneering scholar in Baroque art studies, directly challenged the long-standing prejudice against the Carraccis' eclecticism, arguing that "their approach was never a mindless imitation of past masters, but a deliberate and creative strategy: selecting the most excellent qualities from the greatest artists in history and integrating them into a cohesive whole—achieving a 'synthesis without homogenization' that preserved the essence of classical traditions while adapting to the aesthetic demands of their time." [5] This assertion refutes the stereotype of the Carraccis as rigid traditionalists, highlighting their eclecticism as a purposeful innovation that balanced continuity and transformation. For Cézanne, Richard Schiff's definitive analysis of his artistic development captures the core of his eclectic genius: "Cézanne refused to abandon the structural logic of classical painting, yet he also embraced the sensory immediacy of Impressionism, developing a technique that oscillates 'between description and abstraction.' He retained the discipline of traditional drawing while experimenting with color harmonies rooted in direct observation of nature, forging a style that satisfied both symbolic depth and realist sensibilities—a dialectic of 'making (technique) and finding (originality)' that defines modernist innovation." [6]

By breaking single-style conventions, fostering new aesthetic perspectives, and inspiring cross-tradition expression, eclecticism offers a model of innovation that is both stable and dynamic. This reevaluation invites art historians to move beyond a focus on radical ruptures and recognize the subtle, cumulative innovations that shape art history. For contemporary artists and scholars, the legacy of the Carraccis and

Cézanne lies in their proof that the most enduring innovations often emerge from the thoughtful integration of what has come before.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Shao, D.Z.; Xi, J.Z. A Brief History of European Painting. Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1987.
- [2] Pevsner, N. The History of Art Academies. Trans. Chen, Ping. Changsha: Hunan Science and Technology Press, 2003.
- [3] Liang, Z.C. Respecting Tradition and Escaping Restraints. Diss. China Academy of Art, 2023.
- [4] Lloyd, C. Paul Cézanne: Innovator of the Real World. Trans. Han, Zizhong and Wu, Yue. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2019.
- [5] Mahon, D. Eclecticism and the Carracci: Further Reflections on the Validity of a Label. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1953, 16(3-4), 303-341.
- [6] Shiff, R. Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art. University of Chicago Press, 1984.



© 2026 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)