

Explaining Some of the MODERN

"COCKEYED" ART

By Jane Stafford

DID you ever come away from an exhibit of modern paintings with the feeling that the artist must be cockeyed to make such queer-looking pictures?

If you did, you were not far from being right about it. The strange colors, distorted figures and queer impressionistic effects of modern paintings are due in many cases to defects in the eyesight of the artists, in the opinion of a Los Angeles eye physician, Dr. Lloyd A. Mills.

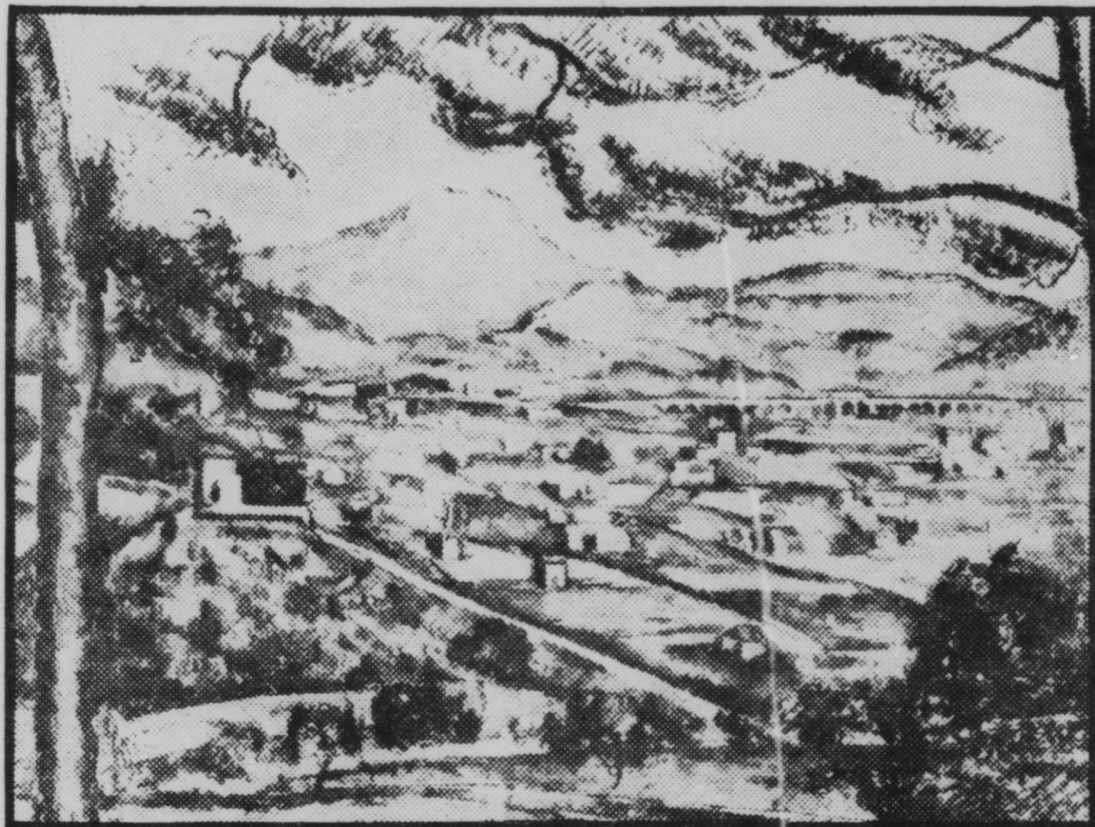
Dr. Mills does not think the artists are cockeyed, but he claims that such visual defects as nearsightedness and astigmatism account for what the average man considers queer in modern art. Dr. Mills gives this explanation of the vagaries of modern art in a report to fellow eye physicians in the Archives of Ophthalmology.

Visual defects, he thinks, may also have been responsible for much that is great in modern art and were perhaps a factor in the founding of the modern school of impressionistic art.

Persons with defective vision, Dr.



Organic disease of the brain can affect eyesight, and it was probably, Dr. Mills says, "a large if not the chief factor in creating the picturized eccentricities of Van Gogh"—whose "Public Gardens at Arles" is shown here.



If you could see a landscape from the sides of your eyes, you might understand how the near-sighted Cezanne painted landscapes such as this—"Mt. St. Victoire."

Mills points out, depend much more on side vision than on central vision. As you know, the things you see out of the sides of your eyes are not very distinct. Nearsighted persons who do not wear glasses to correct the defect see very clearly objects within a short distance from their eyes. Beyond that point, which eye physicians call the far point, they cannot see distinctly, and the vision they use is side vision.

With this type of vision details are lost, Dr. Mills explains. Essential lines and shapes are relatively more striking but objects generally are blurred. Colors, especially blue, are not seen correctly. A considerable percentage of painters have this type of vision, Dr. Mills states. This is only to be expected, since few persons who use their eyes to such extremes as artists do escape some visual defect.

TRULY great art, according to this Los Angeles eye physician, depends on the proper use of both side and central vision.

When you look at a man plowing a field, you see the man and the plow distinctly (with central vision) but the edges of the field, the sky and any surrounding trees (seen with side vision) are not too distinct, though you have

an impression of them. Artists a generation or so ago in painting that scene would have put on their canvases every detail not only of the plowman's face and costume but of the entire scene, so that you could see every leaf on the trees at the edge of the field and every stone the plow had turned up.

Modern artists of the impressionist school paint the whole scene as it appears when viewed with side vision only. The first type of painting is known as photographic, and while it has its place, especially in decoration or for historic purposes, it is never, Dr. Mills says, optically correct, even when pleasing. Impressionism, when carried to an extreme, results in pictures that seem queer and all wrong to most of us.

How an artist with a certain rather common type of visual defect cannot help painting these queer-looking pictures becomes clear when you read Dr. Mills' description of how things look to him when he takes off his eyeglasses.

He has himself compound nearsighted astigmatism. If you happen to have this type of visual defect you might try a similar experiment. The far point for Dr. Mills' eyes, beyond which vision ceases to be clear when he leaves off his glasses, is only about six inches. Within this range, he says, he can ap-

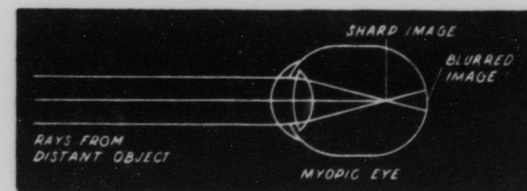
preciate detail that is so fine as to be almost microscopic.

"Beyond this, and especially over 20 feet (6 meters), objects become greatly blurred and colors run together with curious blends and unusual, washed-out values. There is definite oblique distortion at far distances, differing in the two eyes, and often only the essential lines of form and contour provide the clues for identification of the object under examination."

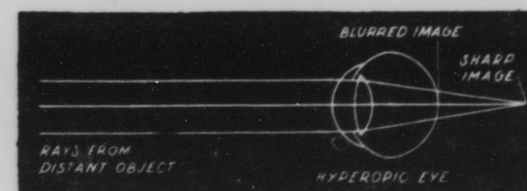
ONE or two degrees of nearsightedness, however, does not seriously handicap a person, Dr. Mills goes on to say. It may, on the contrary, have the advantage of focusing the eye perfectly at a comfortable range for painting or reading.

Probably many artists do not even realize that they are somewhat nearsighted because of the comfort this slight defect gives them at ranges for working. Their nearsightedness can only be told by noting in their paintings their uniform use of side vision with what Dr. Mills calls "its apparitional and rarefied graces."

The visual defects of many artists



The eyeball of the near-sighted, or myopic, eye is elongated, and light rays are focused in front of the retina, diverging to form a blurred image on the retina.



The far-sighted, or hyperopic, eye is smaller than normal, and light rays focus beyond the retina, again blurring the image.

are a matter of record. Cezanne, for example, was quite nearsighted and as a result most of his paintings are out of focus, and his interpretation of color, form and mass, Dr. Mills says, is wholly that of distorted side vision, with much of the color defects that result from nearsightedness. Cezanne struggled over his paintings and was never wholly satisfied with them. He abandoned one portrait, after 115 sittings, and complained that "the contour keeps slipping away from me."

Added to this Cezanne suffered from mental and nervous ails which affected the way he worked.

Another great artist who probably was nearsighted was Renoir. While no direct record of examination of his eyes is known, remarks he made give the clues. He wore no glasses but at the age of 64 spoke of liking to walk close to a picture to study the details.

Degas, famous for paintings and drawings of ballet girls, was extremely nearsighted and wore heavy glasses throughout his adult life. This nearsightedness probably is responsible for the famous pictures of dancing girls, for Dr. Mills points out that it was through the use of side vision—result of the nearsightedness—that Degas was able to depict the grace and movement of the dance in his unsurpassed fashion.

Another modern artist whose paintings may seem queer to you is Pissarro. He suffered from repeated ulcers on the cornea of his eyes. These ulcers and their scars were a constant source of worry and eyestrain.

If you are familiar with the work of John Singer Sargent you will remember that he often painted a red or green line around white objects. Because he had astigmatism, he actually saw such lines which at times he put into his paintings.

While many artists have painted what is seen with side or peripheral vision because that is the only kind of vision they had, others used this method deliberately. Sometimes this was used to achieve greater beauty or artistic value.

Side vision, unfortunately, is often used by artists "who aim merely for effects of mass, line, color or symbolism and particularly by those who are too lazy or ignorant to draw well," Dr. Mills charges.