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The Honest Eye

Camille Pissarro's Impressionism

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the Museum Barberini, Potsdam, and
the Denver Art Museum.

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as well as several private collectors who wish to remain anonymous

Introduction

> I just read the book by Kropotkin. One must admit that if it is utopian, in every way it is a beautiful dream. As we often have had examples of beautiful dreams become realities, nothing prevents us from believing that it will be possible one day, unless man fails and returns to complete barbarism.[1]

As the oldest of the artists who later became known as Impressionists, Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) inspired many colleagues in Paris who had embraced plein-air painting. Born and raised on the island of Saint Thomas in the Caribbean, then a Danish colony, and under the influence of the Romantic painting of Scandinavia, Pissarro already made plein-air studies in Venezuela. He brought to his Parisian circle a worldview that was free of academic rules. Together with his artist friends in France, Pissarro organized eight Impressionist exhibitions. He painted with Claude Monet in the region around Paris, introduced Paul Cézanne to the group, and advocated for the work of Mary Cassatt. He was open to the concerns of the Neo-Impressionists and, unlike Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, even showed with these younger artists.

In recent years, exhibitions of the artist's work have focused on the personality behind this important oeuvre. Richard R. Brettell's *Pissarro's People,* presented in Williamstown and San Francisco in 2011–12, was far more than a portrait exhibition. For the first time, it examined Pissarro's network, his intellectual milieu, and his reception of writings on social philosophy and political ethics. It also investigated Pissarro's network of friends and family in the context of his Jewish origins; as his correspondence shows, relatives who lived abroad were also important to him. In 2017 the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris gave him a retrospective; the same year, the museum Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen, explored Pissarro's collaboration with Danish painter Fritz Melbye on Saint Thomas and exposed connections between early nineteenth-century Danish painting and French Impressionism. In 2021 the Kunstmuseum Basel devoted an exhibition to Pissarro's cooperation with artists such as Cassatt, Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, and Monet, complemented at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford by drawings and letters by Pissarro and his sons, who were also artists, from the Pissarro family archives.

The retrospective in Potsdam and Denver builds on these milestones of Pissarro research. The title *The Honest Eye: Camille Pissarro's Impressionism* points to Pissarro's understanding of perception as a vital impulse of his artistic practice. On May 13, 1891, Pissarro wrote to his son Lucien, "The Impressionists are right, [Impressionism] is a healthy art based on sensations, and it is honest."[2] Trusting his "sensations" while seeking "honesty" in the presence of nature drove Pissarro, who not only became a central figure in the development of Impressionism but was unwavering in his artistic independence to constantly reinvent himself.

Everyday motifs from the industrial suburbs and provincial France bear witness to the painter's sensitivity to the upheavals of the modern age. Pissarro worked on a new image of the landscape. In every painting, he strove for compositional balance and harmony; he searched for equilibrium and wove forms and colors together in an effort to unify the picture plane. His works pay homage to the present moment in all of its unassuming qualities. Whether fieldworkers or domestic servants, Pissarro's figures are monuments to human activity. Timothy J. Clark has characterized the sense of time conveyed by these images as a "unique, unnoticeable, difficult, unrepeatable persistence."[3] For Pissarro, being an artist was a way to develop without constraints, and with a pedagogical ethos, he encouraged his children to embrace the artistic calling as well. As a reader of the social-utopian writings of Pyotr Kropotkin as well as the political and economic literature of his time, Pissarro developed a reserved humanism that was never boastful. With an honest eye, he inscribed this idealism into his art.

The exhibition is organized cooperatively by the Museum Barberini and the Denver Art Museum. Clarisse Fava-Piz, Associate Curator of European and American Art Before 1900 at the Denver Art Museum; Nerina Santorius, Curator and Head of Impressionism at the Museum Barberini; and Claire Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, coeditor of the Pissarro catalogue raisonné, curated the exhibition. We are grateful to them for opening up new perspectives on Pissarro's artistic activity. Together with Angelica Daneo, Chief of Curatorial Affairs, Collections, and Exhibitions/Curator of European Art Before 1900 in Denver, and Daniel Zamani, a longtime curator at the Museum Barberini and now Artistic Director at the Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden, they succeeded in gaining the confidence of major museums, who generously entrusted their valuable works to us. We would also like to thank the many private collectors whose holdings were indispensable for our project, in particular the collections of Isabelle and Scott Black, Mark Kaufman, Tobia and Morton Mower, Juan Antonio Pérez Simón, Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, and Pissarro & Associates Fine Art, as well as those who wish to remain anonymous.

The essays in this catalog were developed in the context of a symposium that took place in Potsdam on May 22, 2024. We are grateful to the authors and museum teams in Denver and Potsdam, especially Curatorial Assistants Valentina Plotnikova and Emily Willkom, for their contributions and careful editing. We would also like to thank Olga Osadtschy, independent curator, who supervised the catalog.

The Pissarro exhibition is the second cooperative project between the Denver Art Museum and the Museum Barberini. In 2019–20 the two institutions organized the highly acclaimed *Monet: The Truth of Nature* in Denver and *Monet: Places* in Potsdam. Just as the wealth of works by Monet in both collections formed the basis for the earlier collaboration, so now the exhibition builds on our Pissarro holdings. There are seven paintings by the artist in the Hasso Plattner Collection, and we are grateful to the museum founder as well as the Hasso Plattner Foundation for permitting them to travel to Denver.

Seven works by Pissarro from the Denver Art Museum's collection will be on view in Potsdam, including two paintings bequeathed to the museum with the Impressionist collection of Frederic C. Hamilton in 2014, a gift that will continue to have an impact well into the future. In Denver, the exhibition is presented by Barbara Bridges, Bridget and John Grier, and the Kristin and Charles Lohmiller Exhibitions Fund, and is supported by the Tom Taplin Jr. and Ted Taplin Endowment, Adolph Coors Exhibition Endowment Fund, Birnbaum Social Discourse Project, Lori and Grady Durham, Kathie and Keith Finger, Sally Cooper Murray, Ellen and Morris Susman, Lisë Gander and Andy Main, Mary Pat and Richard McCormick, Kent Thiry and Denise O'Leary, Christie's, the donors to the Annual Fund Leadership Campaign, and the residents who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD). This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Ortrud Westheider
Director
Museum Barberini, Potsdam

Christoph Heinrich
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Acknowledgments

Bringing together well over a hundred works, including some iconic paintings from both sides of the Atlantic, our exhibition traces five decades of Pissarro's career, honoring the evolution of the artist's practice from his early years in the Caribbean and South America to his time in France as a central figure of the Impressionist movement. Due to his Jewish and Danish Caribbean roots, his pictorial interests that eschewed his peers' choice of upper-class subject matter to depict scenes of the mundane and his anarchist sympathies, Pissarro brought an important external perspective to the Impressionist group. Arranged thematically, the exhibition explores subjects that occupied a central role in the artist's oeuvre, including landscapes, portraits of his family, the domestic life in Éragny-sur-Epte, the artist's studio practice, scenes of the rural world and the local markets, Neo-Impressionist experiments, as well as urban motifs, such as the harbors of Normandy and the bustling streets of Paris.

We are deeply grateful to all our lenders, and we kindly acknowledge the following individuals and their colleagues: Emilie Gordenker and Lisa Smit-Vermeer, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; Asma Naeem, Katy Rothkopf, and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, The Baltimore Museum of Art; László Baán, Szépművészeti Múzeum / Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest; James Rondeau and Gloria Groom, The Art Institute of Chicago; William M. Griswold and Heather Lemonedes Brown, The Cleveland Museum of Art; Marcus Dekiert and Barbara Schaefer, Wallraf-Richartz Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne; Gertrud Oelsner and Dorthe Vangsgaard Nielsen, Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen; Caroline Campbell and Janet McLean, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; Belinda Tate and Robin Cooper, Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields; Julián Zugazagoitia and Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Frédéric Bußmann and Leonie Beiersdorf, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe; Géraldine Lefebvre, Musée d'art moderne André Malraux, Le Havre; Ernst Vegelin van Claerbergen and Karen Serres, The Courtauld, London; Gabriele Finaldi and Christopher Riopelle, The National Gallery, London; Maria Balshaw, Tate, London; Timothy Potts, Davide Gasparotto, and Scott Allan, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Sylvie Ramond and Stéphane Paccoud, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon; Johan Holten and Inge Herold, Kunsthalle Mannheim; Stephanie Wiles and Laurence Kanter, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Max Hollein, Susan Alyson Stein, and Alison Hokanson, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Jack Becker and Taylor J. Acosta, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; Jean-François Bélisle and Anabelle Kienle Ponka, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Alexander Sturgis and Colin Harrison, The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford; Sylvain Amic, Paul Perrin, Isolde Pludermacher, and Anne Robbins, Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Érik Desmazières and Aurélie Gavoille, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris; Walter W. Timoshuk and Emily M. Talbot, Norton Simon Art Foundation, Pasadena, California; Sasha Suda, Jennifer Thompson, and Laurel Garber, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Eric Crosby and Marie-Stéphanie Delamaire, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Alicja

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At the Museum Barberini, we are deeply grateful to the entire team behind this ambitious project. Special thanks are due to Ortrud Westheider, Director; Janine Meyer, Managing Director; Michael Philipp, Chief Curator; Linda Hacka, Provenance Research Associate; Valentina Plotnikova, Curatorial Assistant; Anne Barz, Annelies Legein, and Anna Seidel, Registrars; Achim Klapp, Marte Kräher, Valerie Maul, and Carolin Stranz, Communications and Marketing; Dorothee Entrup, Isabel Acosta, and Andrea Schmidt, Education and Inspiration; Stefan Scholze, Digitization and Information Security; and Leonie Schmidt, Student Assistant.

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“Absolutely Free”
Camille Pissarro’s Dedication as an Artist

1
Landscape at Montmorency, ca. 1859, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

> It's almost impossible to keep a young man from going where his passions lead him. [. . .] When I think that, as a young man, left to my own devices like anyone else, I found myself in a foreign land, free, absolutely free, and lucky enough to never encounter misfortune, I wonder what advice I could possibly give. [. . .] The author of this letter had a powerful distraction: art!!![1]

Passion, freedom, art: Camille Pissarro articulated these three key terms at the age of sixty-eight in a letter to his son Lucien. Yet nothing in Pissarro's background—neither his place of birth nor his family origins—predisposed him to become a painter. The following essay explores Pissarro's dedication to developing free opportunities for creating art outside the Salon and academies, tracing his role in the group of Impressionists and his advocacy for the artists of the next generation.

"Where He Learned to Draw Without a Master": Early Years on Saint Thomas and in Venezuela

Camille Pissarro was born on July 10, 1830, in Charlotte Amalie—a port town on the island of Saint Thomas in the Danish Antilles, now the US Virgin Islands—to a French merchant family of Jewish faith. Later in life, he rarely spoke about his youth or his artistic beginnings on Saint Thomas. The young Pissarro grew up in a diverse, cosmopolitan environment, interacting with Europeans—the community of French, Danish, Spanish, and English merchants who, like his father, conducted business on the island—as well as with the enslaved people from various colonized African countries who lived there.[2] As a child, he attended a Moravian elementary school that provided instruction to children from all these communities.[3] In 1842, at the age of twelve, he was sent to boarding school near Paris.[4] Its director is said to have advised him, "When you return to your country, be sure to draw the coconut trees!"[5] It is not documented whether Pissarro was already interested in drawing at this time or if he visited the museums of Paris during his boarding school period, which ended when he returned to Charlotte Amalie in 1847. When he went back to France in 1855, at the age of twenty-five, Pissarro was already an accomplished artist, with a substantial portfolio of works on paper and paintings.[6] Paul Cézanne later remarked, "He had the good luck of being born in the Antilles, where he learned to draw without a master."[7] Though not entirely accurate—Pissarro did have some instruction—Cézanne's observation reflects how Pissarro started his early training far from the rigid methods of the French academic workshops.

When he returned to Charlotte Amalie in 1847, Pissarro reluctantly joined the family business, a haberdashery and hardware firm. At every opportunity, he would slip away with his sketchbook to capture the lively scenes at the harbor. With a sure hand, he also made portraits and drew women returning from market with their wares balanced on their heads, animals, landscapes dotted with coconut palms, and huts nestled at the foot of lush hills.

One day, while overseeing the arrival of merchandise, Pissarro met Danish painter Fritz Melbye (1826–1869), an encounter that would profoundly alter the course of his life. Melbye, a marine painter, traveled the world producing work for European collectors. Together, they left Saint Thomas—Pissarro departing without his family's permission—for Venezuela, where they lived as bohemian artist-adventurers from 1852 to 1854. Melbye became the first of many artistic companions in Pissarro's life. Years later, Pissarro recalled this bold leap into the unknown:

> In '52, working as a well-paid clerk on Saint Thomas, I couldn't stand it any longer—without further reflection, I left everything behind and fled to Caracas to break the tie that bound me to bourgeois life. I suffered terribly, of course, but I lived.[8]

The two painters traveled across Venezuela, discovering new cultures and ways of life. Most importantly, they created numerous works inspired by the surrounding natural world. Two paintings—*A Plaza in Caracas* (cat. 6), from Venezuela, and *Two Women Chatting by the Sea, Saint Thomas* (cat. 8), painted on Saint Thomas but later redated to 1856—demonstrate the artistic mastery that Pissarro had developed under the guidance of his Danish mentor. His cosmopolitan childhood in the Antilles and his time in Venezuela, enriching and sometimes painful, profoundly shaped Pissarro's adult character. From these experiences, he developed a strong work ethic, determination, a love of art, a deep yearning for freedom and independence, generosity, a spirit of sharing, and a remarkable open-mindedness.

In 1855 his father accepted his vocation as a painter and allowed him to continue his training in France. Yet when he arrived in Paris, the young Pissarro was already an experienced artist. His time in Venezuela had exposed him to a wide range of subjects and motifs. He had also experimented with drawing, watercolor, and oil painting. His preferred themes on Saint Thomas and in Venezuela anticipated those of the Impressionist movement: he depicted daily life and local customs without artifice. His subjects were market scenes, animals, tree-lined roads, the seashore, and people working, conversing, or resting. This interest in using brush and pencil to express the reality of a simple, authentic life would remain central to his work. Later, in Louveciennes, Pontoise, and Éragny-sur-Epte—towns near Paris, but still largely untouched by industrialization—Pissarro captured, with delicacy and sensitivity, the peaceful countryside through the changing seasons, peopled by dignified peasant figures. Yet while his choice of subjects remained largely consistent, Pissarro's artistic style evolved significantly over the decades, influenced by his close ties to other artists.

"Not the Least Delectation for the Eye": The Critics at the Paris Salon

At the time of Pissarro's return to France, the only way to gain recognition from dealers and collectors was to have works accepted at the official Salon de Peinture et de Sculpture, or Salon de Paris. Four years after his arrival in the French capital, in 1859, Pissarro tried his luck and was thrilled when his work was accepted—a small painting titled *Landscape at*

Montmorency, depicting a woman with a donkey by a farmyard (fig. 1). In the catalog, he was listed as a "student of Anton Melbye," the brother of Fritz Melbye.[9] The Salon accepted his work six more times, through 1870, when he sent his last submission. *The Banks of the Marne in Winter* (cat. 13), an austere, melancholy painting exhibited at the Salon in 1866, attracted the attention of two critics and can be considered one of the first works to establish his reputation.

The reviewer of *L'Univers illustré* astutely noted Pissarro's gift for deeming even the most banal or ugly motifs worthy of painting:

> Surely there is nothing more vulgar than this view and nevertheless I challenge you to pass by without noticing it. It becomes original by the abrupt energy of execution, which underlines these uglinesses, instead of seeking to conceal them. One sees that M. Pissarro is not banal through an inability to be picturesque.[10]

The second review came from Émile Zola, writing in *L'Événement* after discovering the artist's work:

> M. Pissarro is an unknown and probably no one will talk about him. I consider it my duty to give him a vigorous handshake before leaving. Thank you, Monsieur, your winter landscape refreshed me for a good half hour, during my trip through the great desert of the Salon. I know that you were admitted only with great difficulty and I congratulate you on that. Besides which, you ought to know that you please nobody and that your painting is thought to be too bare, too black. So why the devil do you have the arrant awkwardness to paint solidly and study nature so honestly! Look, you choose wintertime, you have there a little bit of a road, then a hillside in the background, and open fields to the horizon. Not the least delectation for the eye. A grave and austere kind of painting, an extreme care for truth and rightness, an iron will.[11]

2
Jalais Hill, Pontoise, 1867,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York

In *The Banks of the Marne in Winter,* Pissarro had painted a landscape devoid of any significant event—a scene that, as both critics observed, was not even beautiful. Throughout his career, Pissarro made a point of rendering reality as he saw it, without embellishment or picturesque details. The "pretty," he often warned his son, was a greater danger than the "ugly." His commitment to this philosophy sometimes put him at odds with his dealers and collectors.[12]

"Modern Countryside": First Steps Toward Impressionism

The year 1866 also marked Pissarro's move to Pontoise, a town some twenty miles northwest of Paris. He and his family lived there for two years, before returning to make it their home once again from 1872 to 1882.[13] The paintings *Pontoise* (cat. 15) and *Jalais Hill, Pontoise* (fig. 2) belong to the group of works from his first stay. Using quite large formats, Pissarro set about depicting the panoramas of L'Hermitage, an area on the outskirts of town. The first shows vegetable gardens set against a hillside of terraced housing. The second work depicts a view of a bend in a road from which two elegantly dressed women emerge, illuminated by the light. They pass an embankment that blocks the view of the path they have taken and casts a shadow over the foreground. When the painting was shown at the Salon of 1868, Zola once again praised Pissarro:

> This is the modern countryside. [. . .] And this little valley, this hill, have a heroic simplicity and forthrightness. Nothing would be more banal if it were not so grand. From ordinary reality the painter's temperament has drawn a rare poem of life and strength.[14]

Zola's emphasis on simplicity and forthrightness perfectly described the artist's character as well.

From 1869 to 1872, the Pissarro family moved closer to Paris, renting a house in the town of Louveciennes at the foot of the Marly aqueduct. Pissarro often painted outdoors alongside Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who had also settled in the area. During this period, Pissarro's work underwent its first stylistic changes: his palette became brighter, his brushstrokes lighter, and above all, he used smaller formats that were easier to transport. A topographical study of the sites Pissarro depicted in Louveciennes reveals his distinctive working method: he rarely ventured far from his home on the Route de Versailles, creating twenty-two works from this road alone, most of them just yards from his doorstep. The outdoors served as his studio, and his immediate surroundings provided him with an abundance of subjects. From this fixed location, Pissarro demonstrated remarkable versatility, often revisiting the same motifs from slightly different angles and in varying weather conditions to achieve a sense of constant renewal. In *Route de Versailles, Rain Effect* (cat. 21) his house appears on the left, with the blacksmith's house opposite. *Route de Versailles, Louveciennes, Winter Sun and Snow* (fig. 3) presents the reverse view, with his house hidden behind him and the posthouse visible across the street. The twenty-two paintings of the Route de Versailles do not constitute a formal series due to their varying viewpoints. Standing in front of his house, Pissarro turned in different directions and depicted buildings from close up or from a distance. However, the exhaustive exploration of a single location anticipates both Monet's later serial works and Pissarro's own series of urban panoramas, created from the 1890s onward. *The Thaw* or *The House of Monsieur Musy, Louveciennes* (cat. 22) depicts a nearby house that appears in six distinct paintings, each with such different perspectives and framing that the subject is not immediately recognizable as the same building.[15] This ability to generate multiple motifs from a single subject was characteristic for Pissarro's approach. In Éragny-sur-Epte he would take up this approach again.

3
Route de Versailles, Louveciennes, Winter Sun and Snow, ca. 1870, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

The Conversation, Louveciennes (fig. 4), dated 1870, is notable for its exceptional size: 39 ½ by 31 ⅞ inches. In this highly structured composition, Pissarro shows a conversation between his wife, Julie, seen from behind with their daughter Jeanne-Rachel ("Minette") at her side, and a neighbor. The fence marking the boundary of the family home guides the viewer's gaze toward these three figures; the eye pauses on the neighbor's face before being drawn further toward the Route de Versailles, bathed in brilliant light. The tree's foliage, rendered in small brushstrokes, separates the shaded private space on the left from the sunlit public space on the right. Despite its large format, the canvas was certainly painted *en plein air.* Pissarro and his friends adopted a technique of small brushstrokes and hatchings that allowed them to more accurately capture the texture of foliage and flowers, as well as the shimmering interplay of light and shade on objects. Though relatively subdued in color, this painting represents a significant step in Pissarro's progression toward Impressionism.

"Our Exhibition Is Going Well": Pissarro's Role in the Impressionist Group

After spending a year in London starting in late 1870 to escape the Prussian troops who had occupied their house in Louveciennes, Pissarro and his family returned to Pontoise in 1872 and remained there for ten years. This second period in Pontoise marked a significant chapter in the painter's artistic development and his growing influence within the Impressionist movement. In particular, it coincided with the first of seven independent Impressionist exhibitions. Pissarro was the only artist to exhibit in all eight (the final one in 1886, when he was living in Éragny-sur-Epte). While Renoir and Monet, discouraged by the poor reception of their work, occasionally preferred to try their luck at the official Salon, and others such as Gustave Caillebotte, Mary Cassatt, Cézanne, Edgar Degas, and Sisley eventually abstained entirely, Pissarro never wavered in his decision to participate in these independent exhibitions, despite facing humiliation with each one. The rigid, academic style of the Salon was too stark a contrast to the artist's commitment to independence and freedom.

In 1874 Pissarro, along with Monet, Renoir, and Degas, actively participated in the group's founding and in the selection of artists for its first independent exhibition. At this inaugural showing, he exhibited five landscapes of Pontoise, including *Hoarfrost* (cat. 33), which startled many viewers with its enigmatic grid-like arrangement of shadows. Louis Leroy, one of the harshest opponents of this new style of painting, recounted a dialogue in front of the picture:

4
The Conversation, Louveciennes, 1870, Emil Bührle Collection, Zurich

> "Those furrows? That frost? But they are palette-scrapings placed uniformly on a dirty canvas. It has neither head nor tail, top nor bottom, front nor back."—"Perhaps . . . but the impression is there."—"Well, it's a funny impression!"[16]

Despite the disparaging remarks, Pissarro remained confident. He reported to his friend Théodore Duret, "Our exhibition is going well, it's a success. The critics are tearing us apart and accusing us of not studying—I'm going back to my studies, it's better than reading the reviews; there's nothing to be learned from them."[17] Criticism continued to be fierce throughout the eight exhibitions, often focusing on the use of colors deemed too garish and the seemingly unfinished quality of the works.

Among the thirty exhibitors in 1874 was Paul Cézanne, who gained admission thanks to Pissarro. During the decade from 1872 to 1882, Cézanne often stayed in the Pontoise region to paint alongside his mentor. "He was like a father to me," he later said. "You could always ask him questions; he was something like the good God."[18] From their artistic dialogue emerged works of strong similarity.[19] *View of the Maison des Mathurins, Pontoise* (fig. 5) by Pissarro and *Road at Pontoise* (fig. 6) by Cézanne were painted side by side in 1875. Their shared use of the palette knife, limited color range, and reduction of composition to essential elements reflect the intensity of their artistic exchange. Pissarro later recalled of this period, "Cézanne was under my influence in Pontoise and I was under his. Of course—we were always together!"[20]

Pissarro was a mentor not only to Cézanne but also to Paul Gauguin, who, until 1885, drew heavily on his example: "He was one of my masters, and I would never deny it."[21] Gauguin, eighteen years Pissarro's junior, visited Pontoise frequently between 1879 and 1883 to paint in his mentor's style, copying his subjects and absorbing lessons about broken brushwork. Patient, attentive, and nonauthoritarian, Pissarro was a dedicated teacher throughout his life, guiding and encouraging both his artist friends and his five sons in their artistic growth.

"I Accept the Fight": The Neo-Impressionist Adventure

While Pissarro had fought to have Cézanne admitted in 1874, in 1886, the year of the final exhibition of the Impressionist group, he insisted on including Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, two unknown young artists who were the pioneers of the Divisionist technique, also known as Neo-Impressionism. This new approach to painting, rooted in modern scientific principles, was rejected by the rest of the group. The organization of this final exhibition was thus more chaotic than ever; never before had such diverse styles been displayed in one show. Caillebotte, Monet, Renoir, and Sisley desisted. Pissarro's success in imposing painters whose technique was so far removed from Impressionism highlights his dedication to innovation:

> I explained [. . .] that Seurat was bringing something new that, despite their talent, these gentlemen could not appreciate, and that I personally am convinced of the progress in this art which will, at some point, produce extraordinary results. Besides, I couldn't care less about the opinion of any artists whatsoever, and I don't accept the casual judgments of the romantics [i.e., the Impressionists], who have a vested interested in fighting new trends. I accept the fight, that's all.[22]

5
View of the Maison des Mathurins, Pontoise, 1875, private collection

6
Paul Cézanne, *Road at Pontoise,* 1875, State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

In a separate room, Pissarro proudly exhibited his Divisionist works—including *View from My Window in Cloudy Weather* (cat. 78) and *Apple Picking* (fig. 7)—alongside Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (fig. 8).[23] While criticism persisted, many welcomed this new way of painting. Jean Ajalbert was dazzled upon entering the room blazing with Pissarros, Signacs, and Seurats:

> These artists are seeking something new only in their technique. They arrive at intense coloration through observations that are as accurate as they are simple. They color shadows with the complementary color of light areas; they avoid muddy mixtures by painting with small touches, dots, or by juxtaposing colors: the mixing happens in the eye, not on the palette. They paint by softening, by endlessly modifying an object's local color by the reflections from stronger neighboring colors.[24]

Of Pissarro, Ajalbert perceptively wrote, "He is an old-time wrestler, a master always making progress, and courageously shaping himself according to new theories."[25]

The Divisionist adventure brought Pissarro closer to Neo-Impressionists such as Henri-Edmond Cross, Albert Dubois-Pillet, Léo Gausson, Maximilien Luce, and Belgian painter Théo Van Rysselberghe. Alongside them, he produced a series of works using tiny dots that achieved exceptional luminosity. However, after four years of intense dedication to the technique, he abandoned it, finding the long and painstaking process stifling. He lamented "the impossibility of following my fleeting sensations, and thus of giving life and movement; the impossibility of capturing the many varied efforts of nature, the impossibility or difficulty of giving character to my drawing, of avoiding repetition [. . .]. I had to give it up, it was more than time!"[26] He noted that creating a painting using the dotted technique took him twice as long as his previous methods. The slow, almost mechanical gesture felt ill-suited to the spontaneity of his sensations. A tally of his output between 1885 (the year before he began Divisionism) and 1890 (the year he abandoned it) shows the decline in his production during his Divisionist period. In 1885 he completed thirty-five paintings; in 1886, twenty-two; in 1887, sixteen; in 1888, eight; in 1889, twelve; and in 1890 he returned to twenty-eight.

This interlude, which sparked disagreements with his Impressionist friends and led to the cessation of purchases by his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, further underscores Pissarro's independence and his openness to exploring new techniques, even at an advanced age.

7
Apple Picking, 1886,
Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki

The eight Impressionist exhibitions—spread across twelve years—served as a springboard for Pissarro's career. Not only did he play a key role in organizing them, but each exhibition also introduced the public to new facets of his evolving work. Alongside oils, he exhibited gouaches, fans, and engravings, demonstrating both his technical versatility as well as his curiosity and openness to new approaches. In 1881 and 1882, at the sixth and seventh exhibitions, Pissarro distinguished himself with a number of plein-air figure studies (cats. 40–42). While some praised these works, others compared his figures to those of Jean-François Millet, much to his annoyance: "They throw Millet in my face, but Millet was biblical! For a Hebrew, I seem to be far less so—curious, isn't it?"[27] Unlike Millet, who often portrayed peasants as struggling under hardship (fig. 9), Pissarro depicted them as content and harmoniously absorbed in their environment (fig. 10). The portrait-figures, painted either individually or in groups, often fill the entire canvas space, standing out against natural backgrounds that do not represent any specific landscape. Sensitively rendered, Pissarro's peasant figures were, above all, a tribute to his friend Degas.

"View from My Window": Éragny-sur-Epte, Le Havre, Paris

From 1884 until Julie Pissarro's death in 1926, the Pissarro family lived in Éragny-sur-Epte, a small rural village of around five hundred inhabitants—both then and today—located in the French Vexin region. Their home, situated along a country road, had a large kitchen garden that extended into wide meadows. Despite the limited range of subjects, Pissarro created as many works here as in Pontoise (about 350 oil paintings), though over a period twice as long: twenty years. *View from My Window in Cloudy Weather* (cat. 78), executed in small dots, encompasses all the Éragny motifs—subjects he captured at all hours, in all seasons, and from various angles. Like his earlier views of Louveciennes, the paintings of this motif group demonstrate his practice of returning repeatedly to the same landscape, each time introducing subtle variations in framing and light (cats. 59–61, 69–72).

By the early 1890s, Pissarro undertook numerous painting campaigns away from Éragny-sur-Epte, returning home only to rest with his family. He began to tackle large cityscapes when he was over sixty, despite his fragile health. From 1893 until his death in 1903, he produced nearly three hundred urban views, always from a window, alternating each year between the three Normandy ports of Rouen, Dieppe, and Le Havre (cats. 87–96) and Paris, where he depicted the city's busy neighborhoods (cats. 97–109).

8
Georges Seurat,
A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, 1884–86,
The Art Institute of Chicago

Pissarro left behind an impressive body of work: more than 1,500 paintings, thousands of pastels, gouaches, aquarelles, fans, and drawings, as well as prints—a demanding medium that he mastered with technical excellence. Among his Impressionist friends, he was almost unique in his exploration of such a wide range of techniques. His extensive correspondence reflects his artistic ideas.[28] Pissarro died on November 13, 1903, in Paris, surrounded by his family and friends, shortly after completing a series of paintings in Le Havre. Cézanne later reflected:

> And so perhaps all of us come out of Pissarro. [. . .] Never paint with anything but the three primary colors and their immediate derivatives, he told me. Yes, he really was the first Impressionist.[29]

Indeed, Pissarro was the first Impressionist: as the group's senior and in his complete dedication to the movement. But he also deserves this title because his voice carried great weight in the group's crucial decisions. Pissarro was known as a patient listener, a generous mentor, and an enthusiastic explorer of new ideas. Throughout his career, he maintained an uncompromising standard, painting according to his deepest convictions, while always experimenting and renewing his approach. In every sense, Pissarro earned his title as "father" of the Impressionists.

Translated from French by Helge R. Dascher

9
Jean-François Millet,
Man with a Hoe, 1860–62,
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

10
Peasants Resting, 1881,
Toledo Museum of Art

In Pissarro's Studio
A Window into Impressionist Experimentation

1
Camille Pissarro at a window in his studio in Éragny-sur-Epte, undated (unknown photographer), Musée d'Art et d'Histoire Pissarro—Pontoise

In 1893, at the age of sixty-three, Camille Pissarro transformed the barn on his property in Éragny-sur-Epte into an atelier, and the studio windows framed the artist's view of the surroundings that he would then repeatedly paint (fig. 1). However, Pissarro worried about the implications of this workspace on his artistic practice. In a letter to his sons Lucien, Georges, and Félix, Pissarro shared his apprehension regarding the new arrangement:

> It's a first-rate atelier, but I keep saying to myself, what's the point of having a studio? In the old days, I did my painting anywhere; in every season, in sweltering heat, under rain, in horrid cold spells, I found it in me to work enthusiastically [. . .]. Am I going to be able to work in this new environment??? My painting's bound to be affected; my painting will put on gloves, gosh almighty, I'll be official!!![1]

Pissarro's anxiety reflects his association of a studio with official art. He feared that by confining himself to working indoors, the nature of his paintings would change and turn into much-loathed academic art. Plein-air painting is still considered a major principle of Impressionism, in opposition to the stuffy aesthetic rules of the nineteenth-century academy. But the image of the Impressionist artist standing in front of the easel outdoors, directly transcribing immediate sensations onto the canvas, is a reductive understanding of Pissarro's complex practice.

Not content to just paint outdoors, Pissarro, a prolific draftsman, exercised his eye and hand on a near-daily basis and used his drawings to build a wide repertoire of figures and motifs that he incorporated into his paintings. Moreover, the artist often annotated in pencil the colors that he intended for his painted compositions. Pissarro also carefully prepared his paintings before working at the easel. He did not necessarily design the drawing in such a way that it could be transferred directly to the canvas, but rather he gathered enough visual data to develop and refine his final composition.[2] Pissarro's rigorous artistic process destabilizes the common understanding of Impressionist painting as the direct and immediate transcription of atmospheric effects directly experienced by the artist.

Plein-air practice dominated Pissarro's early Impressionist years, but even before the creation of a dedicated studio space at Éragny-sur-Epte, Pissarro sometimes worked indoors. Weather conditions could affect the artist's progress on his paintings initiated outdoors, forcing him to pursue his work inside.[3] Moreover, Pissarro's dacryocystitis, which he had been suffering from for some time, worsened around 1889. The chronic eye infection made

it difficult for him to paint outside. Even at the time, critics noted that Pissarro's work was constructed and rigorous, and while initiated *sur le motif,* his paintings were completed in the studio. In 1892 art critic and novelist Georges Lecomte was one of the first to comment on Pissarro's artistic process:

> For a long time now, Mr. Pissarro had ceased to work exclusively in front of nature, to render its momentary and incidental details. After having fixed in watercolor or pastel the physiognomy of a site, the appearance of a farmer or an animal, he devotes himself, far from the motif, to a work of composition during which the relative and the superfluous are pruned: only the essential aspects contributing to the meaning and the decorative whole of the work remain.[4]

Lecomte understood the studio as a necessary stage in Pissarro's artistic process, where the artist was able to distance himself from the motif in order to capture the essence of his subject and achieve the unity of his composition. Moreover, Lecomte portrays Pissarro as an artist who navigated fluidly between watercolor, pastel, and oil on canvas without any aesthetic hierarchy in the artist's mind. Other contemporary critics concurred, including Charles Kunstler, who noted:

> One thing generally unknown to the public is that Pissarro is not just a plein-air painter, a painter of impressions. He executed *in his studio* not only numerous pastels and gouaches, but also large paintings of tedders and harvests, looking for new layouts, but nevertheless using direct studies, after nature, some very advanced.[5]

Although often compared to contemporary landscape painters Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley, Pissarro had more in common with Edgar Degas in his insatiable search for new technical and pictorial problems. This essay aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the artist's process and oeuvre beyond the wide-spread recognition of Pissarro as a well-known Impressionist plein-air painter. It will also examine how seriality is implicated in Pissarro's studio aesthetic and unveil the artist's studio practice through the study of the proliferation of motifs and experiments across disparate media. It posits a definition of the studio not only as the physical space where the artist pursued his creative endeavors but also as a laboratory of experimentation with forms, media, and motifs.

2
The Pontoise Bridge, 1891,
private collection, Luxembourg

3
The Pontoise Bridge, 1875,
private collection

Seriality

Throughout his career, Pissarro used seriality and multiples to create his compositions and advance his artistic experimentations. This essay states that a serial production is the reworking of one image into another and is different from multiplicity, which consists of creating multiple views of the same scene, perhaps from different angles. Importantly, serialization is more inherently a studio practice, both in the physical sense of where the work was created and in the conceptual sense of how the work was conceived and assessed.[6] In some cases,

the whole composition is serialized; in others, just a motif. Sometimes, images and motifs are reworked across media—paintings, prints, and decorative arts. While seriality and multiplicity are two different processes, artists can use one or the other, or some combination of the two, and sometimes it is not completely clear if the repetition is a multiple or a series, especially in the case of the paintings inspired by what Pissarro saw from his studio window.[7]

Looking at *The Pontoise Bridge,* painted in 1891, one might think that Pissarro had set up his easel alongside the river on the Quai Bucherelle in Pontoise, where the artist frequently painted, next to the group of horses grazing in the foreground (fig. 2). The bridge running across the composition leads to a group of customs houses on the Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône bank of the river. However, far from being done *sur le motif,* this painting is a reappropriation of an earlier composition painted in 1875, when Pissarro still lived in Pontoise (fig. 3).[8] Locals would have noticed that by 1891 the stone bridge had been replaced by an iron bridge.[9] In the new version of *The Pontoise Bridge* executed in his studio, Pissarro abandoned the figures, flattened the perspective, cropped the composition, and recentered it around the horses and the streetlight to the left. Less naturalistic than the older version, this painting gives more prominence to the vivid colors applied in small touches across the surface, an approach that is characteristic of the Impressionist technique.

This case is not an isolated example in Pissarro's oeuvre since that same year the artist created *Snow Effect with Cows in Montfoucault* (1891, private collection), the third of a series of paintings on the same motif dated 1874 and 1882, respectively.[10] Here again, Pissarro used a more naturalistic composition from the early 1870s to experiment with a new style. In the 1882 version, he dramatically cropped the composition. A decade later, he used his first version of the painting as a point of reference to experiment with a more varied chromatic palette and vibrant touches of colors.

This practice of seriality and reworking not only included motifs close to home, such as Pontoise and Montfoucault, but also views reconstructed after trips across the English Channel. For instance, *Charing Cross Bridge, London* from 1891 (fig. 4) constitutes a small-scale version of another painting of the same subject, itself painted in the artist's studio after Pissarro's trip to London in 1890 (fig. 5).[11] One recognizes Charing Cross Bridge viewed from Waterloo Bridge, the high towers of the Houses of Parliament with Westminster Hall and Westminster Abbey in the center background, and Whitehall Court to the right. In his letters to his niece Esther Isaacson, based in London, Pissarro asked her about the exact topography of the site, which he was trying to recollect to execute his painting back home.[12] The smaller 1891 version exemplifies the artist's attempt at using a new style. Instead of constantly looking for new motifs, Pissarro revisited earlier compositions in his studio over time to experiment with new techniques and styles, such as Neo-Impressionism.

4
Charing Cross Bridge, London, 1891, private collection, Switzerland

5
Charing Cross Bridge, London, 1890, National Gallery of Art, Washington

As art historian Joachim Pissarro has demonstrated, many examples of "this vast program of 'repeats' of earlier themes" abound, and in the 1890s, another type of artistic revision appears in which Pissarro reworked many of his Neo-Impressionist paintings.[13] While this practice of repetitions and variations in Pissarro's oeuvre has been little studied, it sheds new light on the serial paintings of his late career. Furthermore, it recasts Pissarro's studio at the center stage of his artistic production.

In 1884, after many years marked by constant moves, Pissarro settled in the village of Éragny-sur-Epte, a commune located about fifty-six miles northwest of Paris, in the Département de l'Oise.[14] Thanks to a loan from Monet and a contribution from Paul Durand-Ruel, Camille and Julie Pissarro bought the property they were renting in 1892. It was composed of a house, an orchard, and a barn—which the painter would shortly convert into his studio. Even before transforming the barn into a studio space, Pissarro painted indoors from the second-floor window of the house. The artist multiplied the views of his surroundings from this elevated viewpoint, capturing the atmospheric changes of the alluvial plain of the Epte River at different times of the day. The four views of nearby Bazincourt, ranging from 1884 to 1892, are part of one of the earliest and largest series of pictorial variations completed by the artist (cats. 69–72).

In 1893 Pissarro hired Parisian architect Alfred Besnard to plan and oversee the conversion of his barn into a studio. The correspondence between Pissarro and Besnard not only lists the contractors, masons, carpenters, and locksmiths who worked on the project but also highlights Pissarro's involvement in the various phases of the studio transformation. The artist provided feedback on the successive architectural plans that Besnard submitted, weighing in on every aspect of the new studio.[15]

A side-by-side comparison of *View from My Window, Éragny* (cat. 78) and *Plum Trees in Blossom, Éragny* (cat. 59) highlights the transformations of Pissarro's property. In 1893 the thick wall running alongside the artist's garden was torn down, creating an opening leading to the meadow. In *Plum Trees in Blossom, Éragny,* painted in 1894, a figure carrying a bucket stands at the juncture where the wall would have previously stood, signaling a newly opened path. The old barn depicted on the left side of *View from My Window*, begun in 1886, was transformed into the artist's studio as seen in *Plum Trees in Blossom, Éragny*: the henhouse was removed, and a set of stairs was added to the building. Access to the studio was possible via a covered exterior staircase (fig. 6). Pissarro commented on the completion of his studio to his son Lucien in August 1893, accompanying his letter with a sketch of the stairs of the newly built studio (fig. 7):

> My studio is coming along, they're putting in the ceiling, it [the studio] measures seven by eight and a half yards and has a very high ceiling, there will be a sizable window to the west, which I would have liked to have square, but I thought of it too late, the door will be right by the entrance to the barn, [with] the stairway in the yard, there will be a roof of old tiles. [. . .] I forgot the main thing, an arched picture window three yards wide to the north, which will give a good light.[16]

6
Camille Pissarro on the stairs to his studio in Éragny-sur-Epte, undated (unknown photographer), Pissarro Family Archives

7
Sketch of studio stairs, in a letter from Camille Pissarro to his son Lucien, Éragny-sur-Epte, August 27, 1893, The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford