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## A major museum show in Boston heralds the impressionist apostle of art for the people. By April Kingsley

Felix Bracquemond, the printmaker who exhibited with the impressionists, said about Camille Pissarro, "This is not a man, but a bowsprit!" Like a spar projecting from the bow of impressionism, he held together the tacks of the various factions and offshoots of the movement, while steadfastly supporting its central jib—a philosophy of art for and of the people, but not for the Salon aristocracy. Along with Monet, Renoir, Sisley, and Degas, he broke through the wall of academic resistance to "democratic art" (as it was then defined in terms of ordinary people pictured going about their mundane activities in directly observed typical settings) and rode the crest of the wave which was the first modern-art movement.

From May 20 through August 9, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts will host the most comprehensive Pissarro exhibition ever seen in America. The show, which originated in London last fall and traveled to Paris before coming to Boston, includes more than ninety Pissarro paintings and one hundred prints and drawings.

Pissarro was the bridge between Courbet and Cézanne, between realism and modernism. His early, mid-1860s canvases have all the ruggedness of Courbet, the precise tonalism of Corot, and the structural solidity we have come to admire in the later works of Cézanne. Pissarro built his landscapes the way the Greeks built the Parthenon—in horizontal layers, from base to articulated architrave, with columnar trees and capitallike roofs. Careful studies preceded each oil, yet the meteorological observations are so accurately transcribed into tones that you feel you know the temperature and moisture content of the air as though

# Camille Pissarro

you were experiencing them. His was not the exquisitely all-seeing eye of Claude Monet; his was not the flesh-equals-pigment sensuality of Auguste Renoir; nor was his the daringly oblique formalism of Edgar Degas. Camille Pissarro's specialness lay in his ability to synthesize and solidify—to make something solid "like the art of the museums" out of impressionism, as his self-proclaimed pupil Paul Cézanne was later to say and to do in his own way.

Pissarro had experimented with eliminating black from his palette as early as 1865 and had been juxtaposing large strokes of unmodulated color well before 1869 when he founded impressionism with Monet and Renoir. He painted in *plein air* alongside them daily in the area around Louveciennes and La Grenouillère before both he and Monet escaped to England in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War. The invading Prussians requisitioned Pissarro's house for use as a barracks and stable, slaughtering animals in his garden and using his canvases as outdoor rugs to keep the mud off their feet. It is thought approximately one thousand of Pissarro's works from a dozen productive years were lost to the world. Included were most of the paintings which would have confirmed for posterity the claim critic Armand Silvestre made, when reviewing the first impressionist exhibition in 1874, that Pissarro was "basically the inventor of this painting." It is a devastating hiatus in our knowledge of Pissarro's lifework, particularly because the work we do have from the years just prior to 1870 is so strong—the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Côte du Jallais, Pontoise* (1867) and the marvelous *Locks at Pontoise* (1869-70) being sufficient examples.

Cézanne called Pissarro "the first impressionist," but that may simply mean he was first in Cézanne's eyes. It was Pissarro who set the example for Cézanne that freed him from his turbulent and obsessive figure paintings. Pissarro showed the younger artist not only his techniques, but also his patience, his ready receptiveness to the "motif," and the importance of making an individual response to one's sensations. Pissarro never liked teaching per se, but set a consistent example for all the "students" in his so-called School of Pontoise,

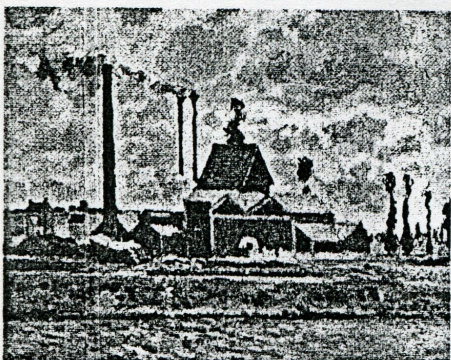
*Above: Pissarro did few self-portraits and only one etched portrait, Self-portrait, 1890-91, etching on zinc, 7¼ x 7¾ inches. Right: The Hillside of L'Hermitage, Pontoise, circa 1867, oil on canvas, 59½ x 79 inches.*







Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts



The Brooklyn Museum, New York

*Top: The Climbing Path, L'Hermitage, Pontoise, 1875, oil on canvas, 21 1/8 x 25 3/4 inches, from a period when Pissarro worked closely with Cézanne. Above: Factory near Pontoise, 1873, oil on canvas, 18 3/8 x 22 inches. Right: The Backwoods of L'Hermitage, Pontoise, 1879, 49 5/8 x 64 1/4 inches, is one of Pissarro's largest paintings.*

and he was always ready with advice and help for a struggling artist. Besides Cézanne and Gauguin, who had extensive guidance from "Père" Pissarro, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Signac, Maximilien Luce, his own sons Lucien, Georges (known as Manzana), and Paul-Emile, as well as Pierre Matisse, and even Francis Picabia took his advice to heart.

In a radical role reversal, however, the teacher later became the pupil. Already unifying his brushwork in the late 1870s, Pissarro was apparently searching for a systematic way to unify his paintings coloristically. In 1885 he met the brilliant young painter Georges Seurat,

the inventor of a system for applying "without awkwardness and even with much accuracy, the method of multicolored stroke dear to Camille Pissarro," in the words of the art critic Roger Marx. Pissarro jumped at it: Seurat's pointillist method not only seemed to be a logical next step for unsystematic impressionism, but "it had the additional advantage of being 'scientific' at a time when anarchists like Pissarro believed in the promise of science to pierce the secrets of nature and to give everyone the intellectual and material benefit of this knowledge." If there was a tradeoff between the two men, it probably happened earlier, since Pissarro's rugged compositions seem to be a logical influence on a Seurat canvas like the Guggenheim's *Farm Laborer* (1882).

The fact that Pissarro could so readily embrace a new painting style—even though he did not stay with its time-consuming method of execution for long—was shocking to his fellow impressionists and to his dealers, collectors, and supporting critics. He risked what little financial security he had achieved by the mid-1880s, because he believed in the rightness of Seurat's method, just as he had steadfastly—for moral reasons—refused to exhibit at the Salon even though that was the only clear path to financial reward. Renoir, Monet (from whom he had to borrow money at times), and most of the other impressionists capitulated to success and showed at the Salon, but Pissarro's antiroyalist, antielitist, antieestablishment politics were truly anarchistic and he did not believe that an "official" stamp of approval should be placed on any work of art. He firmly believed that "the impressionists

The Prussians slaughtered his animals and used his canvases as outdoor rugs.



The Cleveland Museum of Art



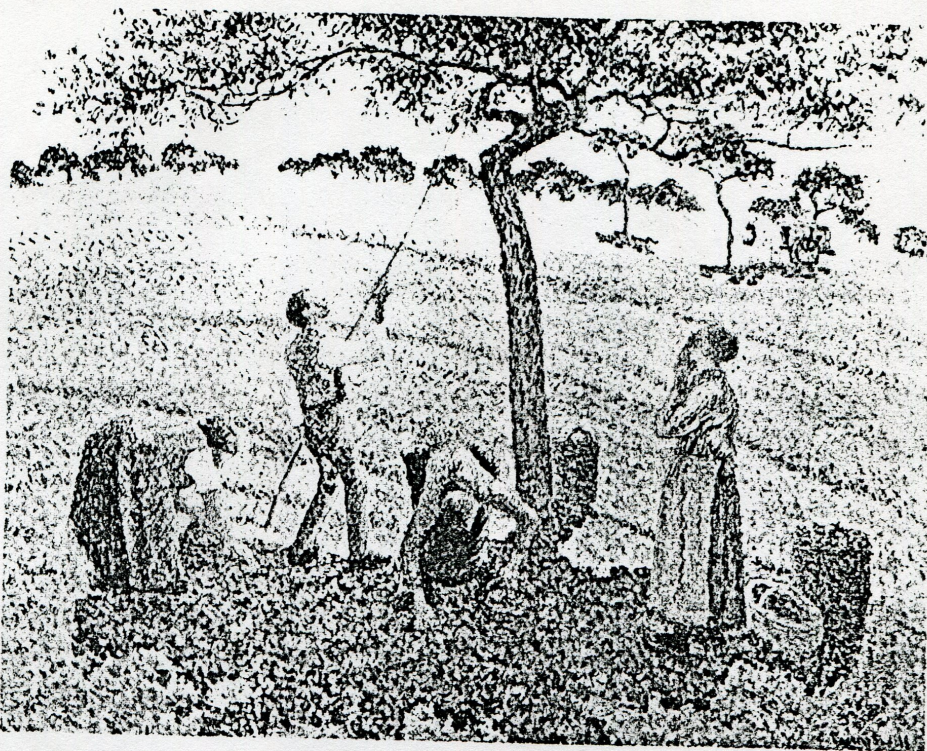
"I left everything and fled to Caracas. What I suffered was unbelievable, but I survived."

have the true position, they stand for a robust art based on sensation, and that is an honest stand," which is why he insisted on showing in all eight impressionist exhibitions despite the warring factions that sought to destroy that hard-won independent tradition. He had come to feel, however, that Seurat and his colleagues (which included his own son Lucien), the "new" impressionists, were closer to the heart of that position than his old comrades Monet and Renoir, whom he now deemed romantics. Recent history has tended to validate this personally difficult judgment of Pissarro's. He felt closer to the neoimpressionists' subject matter as well—their factories, quays, work barges, and street circuses were of the working class like Pissarro's peasants and crowded street and marketplace scenes. By contrast, Monet's cathedrals were upsetting to Pissarro's anticlerical beliefs, and his increasingly narrow interest in capturing the fleeting moment seemed somewhat frivolous to Pissarro's peasantlike ethical sense.

Pissarro rarely painted unpeopled landscapes, and often the natural setting is only an unobtrusive backdrop for a figure or group. Pissarro had received a considerable amount of academic training, and despite his youthful comment to Cézanne that the Louvre ought to be set afire, it is obvious that he spent a good deal of effort studying the old masters. *The Gleaners* (1889), for instance, harks back to Brueghel, and *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte* (1886) can be seen as a modern "three ages of man" or "three Graces," and many other figure groupings refer back to Dutch genre painting.

Pissarro's lifelong antipathy to the bour-

Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas



geoisie undoubtedly began in his youth in Saint Thomas where his father, a French Jew from Bordeaux, ran a successful general store. He had a taste of the "other side" while he was abroad for schooling as a teen-ager, and he had come back to Saint Thomas with a well-developed drawing technique and a decided taste for sketching out-of-doors from real life models. He lasted four years working in his father's shop and drawing in his spare time before he escaped to Caracas, Venezuela, with Fritz Melbye, a young Danish painter, seeking adventure. He said later, "I found I could not bear Saint Thomas, and without further reflection I left everything and fled to Caracas in order to break the bond which tied me to a bourgeois existence; what I suffered was unbelievable, but I survived."

Even though Pissarro's ties to his family re-

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mained tight, and he performed all the familial duties required of him as an adult, his father, upon his death, apparently left him no money, though he left sums to both the Protestant church and the synagogue. Neither of his parents had approved of his liaison with Julie Vellay, a peasant's daughter, and it was only with the greatest reluctance that his mother granted them permission for a civil wedding before the birth of their third child. Pissarro's Jewish, bourgeois background produced an artist who despised religion, whatever its denomination, loved his family, disliked formal schooling, and, in its place, encouraged his children's artistic abilities. He believed wholeheartedly in the physical and psychological benefits of hard work, living frugally, but uncompromisingly, for his art (and that of his children). Pissarro supported anarchism as the only political ideal in which there would be no authority above the common man and woman.

Despite the manifold evidence of Pissarro's deep revolutionary commitment in life and politics, few recent critics have taken that com-

## Pissarro in America

Small concentrations of Pissarro's works can be found in five major American museums.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has ten Pissarro works dating from 1867 to 1899. These include *The Jallais Hill, Pontoise* (1867), *A Cowherd on the Route du Thou'pontoise* (1874), and *Old Market Rouen and the Rue de L'Epicerie* (1898). The collection also includes two versions of Pissarro's 1899 work, *The Gardens of Tuileries on a Winter Afternoon*.

The Art Institute of Chicago has ten Pissarro works. Stars of the collection include the *Girl Sewing* (1895), *Woman and Child at the Well*

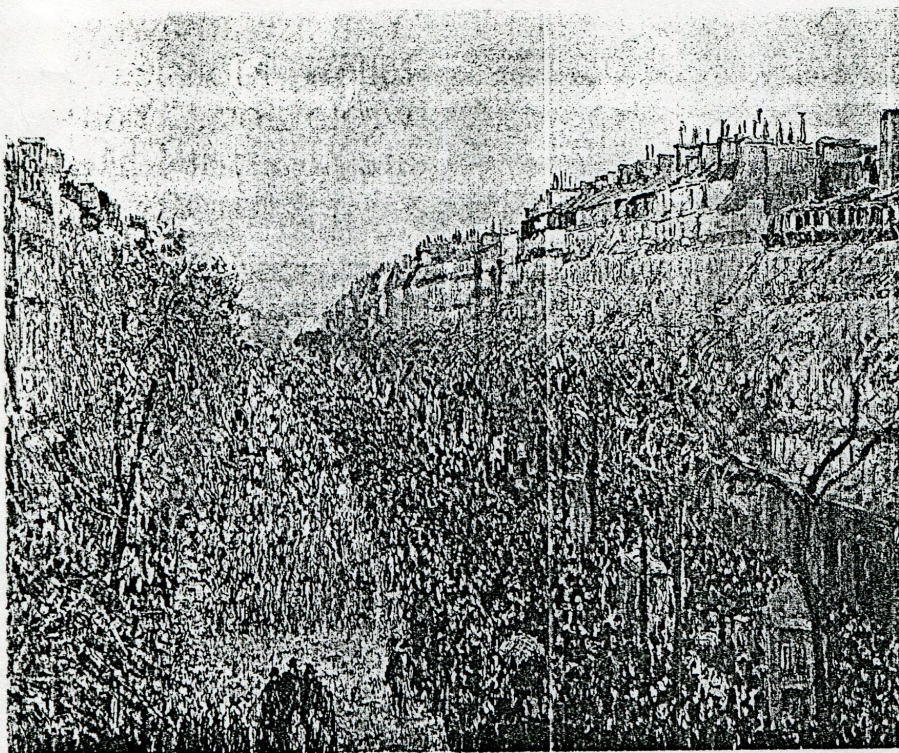
(1871), and *The Crystal Palace* (1871).

The National Gallery's collection of eight Pissarro paintings includes *Boulevard des Italiens, Morning, Sunlight* (1899), *Orchard in Bloom, Louveciennes* (1872), *Place du Carrousel, Paris* (1900), and *Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat* (1881).

The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts owns seven Pissarro canvases, including *The River Oise Near Pontoise* (1873), *Piette's House at Montfoucault* (1874), and *The Road: Rain Effect* (1870).

The host Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has in its permanent collection eight Pissarro paintings, as well as important groups of drawings and original prints.





The Armand Hammer Foundation

Left, top: Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte, 1888, oil on canvas, 23 1/8 x 28 1/4 inches, reflects time when Pissarro experimented with Seurat's neoimpressionistic technique. Left: On thin, irregularly shaped piece of copper, Pissarro created one of his technically most unusual prints: The Woman on the Road, 1879, aquatint, 6 1/8 x 8 1/4 inches. Above: One of a series of thirteen views of the boulevard, boulevard Montmartre, mardi gras, 1897, oil on canvas, 25 x 31 1/2 inches, is the only one without the lamp post in the foreground.

itment seriously for its effect on his art. It is naturally difficult today for us to see what was so revolutionary about painting peasants, or Bohemian hangouts like *La Moulin de la Galette*, but it helps to recall the rage that greeted Courbet's *Stone Breakers* in 1849, the year Pissarro came to Paris to live. That infamous work inflamed passions, as a critic said at that time, because "no one wanted to admit that a stone breaker is equal to a prince" or to see so much canvas used up depicting peasants when only sovereigns have the right to be painted full-size." Eleven years later Jean Rousseau wrote that Pissarro "uses a robust and exuberant talent to accentuate the vulgarities of the contemporary world," and Emile Zola "felt it my duty to shake his hand vigorously" because he evinced a "supreme concern for truth and rightness, a strong, harsh will. You are an awkward fellow, Monsieur!" he wrote. "You are an artist I like." These critics admired such Pissarro canvases as *The Banks of the Marne in Winter* (1866) for precisely the reasons most other critics of the day despised

them—and Courbet's work as well: their down-to-earth naturalism.

Many of the paintings of the early 1870s, done in and around Pontoise (the cabbage capital of France), were mocked by reactionary critics because of their humble subject matter (cabbages were assumed even when not apparent), but these are among the very finest paintings of his life. The pearly light of Corot informs the classics of this period—*The Crossroads* and *The Lock at Pontoise*, both of 1872; the *Factory at Pontoise* (1873); and *The Entry into the Village of Voisins* (1872)—while some of the titanic energy of Cézanne seems to lurk behind the twisting *Chestnut Trees of Louveciennes* (1872), one of Pissarro's masterpieces.

A high point is reached in a great painting like *The Climbing Path, L'Hermitage, Pontoise* (1875) which is rarely matched in later country landscapes. As the 1870s waned, both the size and troubles of Pissarro's family increased while his finances dwindled. He was constantly trying to mitigate the many disputes among the impressionists about the annual exhibition, defections to the Salon, and the inclusion of new impressionists like Gauguin, Caillebotte, and Guillaumin. All of the impressionists were in trouble as a result of both adverse criticism and a serious monetary crisis in France, but Pissarro's paintings did indeed fall off in quality and consistency. During these years, however, he made some amazing technical and conceptual advances in the print medium, working with great intensity side-by-side with Degas and Mary Cassatt, each spurring the others on to greater improvisatory ac-

complishments. They invented all sorts of free and painterly effects in order to translate an impressionist vision into the graphic medium, and their innovations have become an invaluable part of the repertory of print technique. Pissarro, alone among the landscape impressionists, produced a significant body of work, over two hundred plates, in the medium.

Some of the Montfoucault canvases, particularly *The Harvest* of 1876, continue the limpid clarity of the early 1870s, but for the most part Pissarro is struggling for pictorial unity by means of brush stroke and hue, rather than tone, as before. A few paintings, *The Cote des Boeufs*, *Pontoise*, and *The Red Roofs, Corner of the Village*, *Winter*, both of 1877, succeed despite the problems, and some of the market scenes at Pontoise, like the one in the Norton Simon Collection, are powerful figure paintings, though hardly impressionistic; but most of the paintings of the late seventies and early eighties seem unclear. He found the answer to his problems temporarily in Seurat's divisionism, but by the end of the eighties he was desperately trying to find a substitute for the rigid and time-consuming "dot."

The best figure paintings of the later 1880s and the 1890s return to tonalism and to a free, unregulated brush stroke. They tend to glorify the hard-working peasant by the studied grace of the poses, which seem either dancelike or monumental in the manner of statues. Even a relatively "pure" landscape like the very special *View from My Window at Eragny* (1886-88)—a remarkable prefiguration of Balbus's best landscapes fifty years hence—creates an idealizing ambience of perfection for the agrarian life. Critics often compared these later paintings of peasants with those of Millet, which incensed Pissarro since he was antireligious and thought of Millet as self-consciously biblical. Pissarro's attitude in honoring honest labor was revolutionary and utopian, never sentimental.

It may be that Pissarro came to terms with the inevitable industrialization of the work force in his last years. He had been painting factories and trains into some of his finest early paintings, such as *Lordship Lane Station, Upper Norwood, London* (1871), where a train rushes at us on a track that dramatically clefs the landscape—and the picture space—into two distinct parts. But the presence of industry generally seemed disruptive to the peace of the countryside. Nestled amid the farmhouses of many an early work are chimneys billowing





County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

forth clouds of gray-particled smoke. Even Pissarro's sympathetic portrait, *Factory Near Pontoise* (1873), with all its crystalline geometry, or his late sixties series of views of a new factory across the Oise from Pontoise; cannot prepare us for the exciting series of bustling dockside and river-bridge scenes he painted in Rouen in the late 1890s, including the grand *Boieldieu Bridge, Rouen, Damp Weather* (1896). We view the frenetic activity of urban commercial life with the gaping-eyed amazement of a country bumpkin on his first visit to the city. Nothing in that person's life, nor in Pissarro's oeuvre up to this point, has readied us for the shock of so much physical and visual action. Pissarro's time had finally come; he was doing fairly well financially since sales were good and his standing among artists was excellent. He owned his home and was able to travel to places like Rouen for long periods of working from new motifs. His only problem was a recurrent eye infection brought on by drafts or dust particles, but he could paint safely behind window glass. Instead of being a handicap, this restriction seems to have brought about a great efflorescence in his art.

After a decade or more of unevenness and rushing problem solving, Pissarro comes through at the end with some of the most daring, innovative, and complex paintings of his career. The horizon line is way up at the top of the picture or nonexistent in these bird's-eye views of Rouen, London, and Paris, which allows him to use his considerable powers as a pictorial architect to build the picture space from bottom to top with the kind of formal urgency a composer can bring to the symphonic form, but not to the sonata. The all-over

*Above: La Place du Théâtre Français, Paris, 1898, oil on canvas, 28½ x 36½ inches, belongs to the series of paintings executed from a window of the Grand Hotel du Louvre. Right: Two Women in a Meadow, Sunset at Eragny, 1897, oil on canvas, 25 x 31 inches.*

homogenization of a composition like the formidable *La Place du Théâtre Français, Paris* (1898) is remarkable for its daring modernity. It parallels Monet's early water lilies in predicting much of twentieth-century painting.

Pissarro's dilemma was that of every artist who has entered art history at the right time to be part of an important art movement: how does one remain true to one's artistic credo and yet not stagnate? Pissarro was horrified at the notion of painting the same picture all one's life, and yet the alternative—a continued intense search—was certainly painful. Although he was more open than any of his fellow impressionists to new painting ideas, he remained an impressionist to the end, albeit a very different one from the impressionist he was when he began. Since he believed in a universal, nonallusive, antiaquarian art for everyone and saw "impressionism as a healthy, straightforward art, based on individual sensations," he was able to make a living art out of impressionism that remains viable for us today, just as it remained vital throughout his years of searching. □

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Sotheby Parke Bernet

"You are an awkward fellow, Monsieur!" wrote Zola. "You are an artist I like."

