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Getting to know Pissarro

by *Hilton Kramer*

On "Camille Pissarro: Impressionist Innovator" at the Jewish Museum.

Pissarro … remains the painter for those who look at, rather than for those who read about, painting.
—Walter Sickert, 1923

Only someone who has experienced painting as a world in which it is possible to immerse as well as divert oneself can appreciate the inflections of Pissarro's painting. Shock and immediate effects are sacrificed for the sake of subtleties, passages, modulations, the mediation of contrasts. And little masterpieces are to be found complete in themselves in the dozen or so brushstrokes with which such a detail as a cab is indicated.
—Clement Greenberg, 1944

There are great painters who seem fated to be perpetually rediscovered, and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) is one of them. Everyone with an interest in modern painting knows, or thinks he knows, Pissarro's work, but in the large-scale museum surveys devoted to Impressionist painting it tends to be overlooked. It doesn't lodge itself in the public mind the way certain pictures by his contemporaries do. In the company of Monet, Renoir, and Degas, Pissarro's paintings tend to look modest and understated, even tame. There are no outsize pictures in Pissarro's oeuvre, and there are none that boast of what Picasso once described as "the big clash of the cymbals." He had a horror of ostentation, and was a merciless critic of his own work. He could be harsh and astute about the work of others, too—as his wonderful letters to his son Lucien attest. Yet he was so responsive to the strengths of his contemporaries and so determined to test the validity of their discoveries in his painting that he was sometimes in danger of allowing their influence to derail his own artistic course. It was the kind of risk he was willing to take, however, in the interest of enlarging the possibilities of his art. On that matter, Pissarro didn't believe that anyone—himself included—had the last word. Which is why, late in life, when Matisse asked the elderly Pissarro, "What is an Impressionist?", he replied that "an Impressionist is a painter who never paints the same picture, who always paints a new picture." That may constitute a hazardous principle for an artist who lacks an inner core of conviction and experience—in other words, a resolute artistic conscience—but this was never a problem for Pissarro. He was constitutionally incapable of striking a false note.

How often Pissarro succeeded in painting new pictures—and new pictures of astonishing quality—remains, nearly a century after his death, a subject that is still in the process of being revealed to us. The exhibition that was organized in London, Paris, and Boston fifteen years ago to mark the 150th anniversary of the artist's birth seemed so comprehensive that many people must have taken away the impression that they had at last seen Pissarro complete. Yet new studies continued to illuminate aspects of the artist's *oeuvre* that were only briefly glimpsed in the 1980 retrospective. Then, in the exhibition called "The Impressionist and the City: Pissarro's Series Paintings," which was organized by Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro in 1992 for museums in Dallas, Philadelphia, and London, we were once again confronted with a Pissarro we hardly knew—the "late" Pissarro whose "series" paintings of urban subjects turned out to be quite as radical and prophetic as anything to be seen in late Monet or late Degas or late Cézanne.

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It is worth noting in regard to both the 1980 retrospective and the 1992–93 show of "Series Paintings" that neither of them came to New York. No doubt there were legitimate logistical reasons why no major museum in the art capital of the country found it possible to provide a venue for these important exhibitions, but I frankly doubt that logistical problems are sufficient to explain such a consistent policy of indifference to Pissarro's achievement. In the same period, after all, no New York museum was prepared to take the great Constable retrospective that was organized at the Tate Gallery in London in 1991. This suggests, at the least, that aesthetic quality of the highest order is not a good enough reason for certain of our museums to take the trouble to bring us major exhibitions of a sort that are unlikely to be seen again for a generation or more. And when we think of some of the exhibitions which New York museums have thought it more important to bring us—the Bruce Nauman retrospective, for example—we must also wonder whether this melancholy policy doesn't have something to do with a loss of interest in painting as a high artistic endeavor.

This spring, with the Nauman show occupying an immense amount of space at the Museum of Modern Art, the kitsch-dominated 1995 Biennial Exhibition filling the entire interior of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the likes of Ross Bleckner and Felix Gonzalez-Torres dominating the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, there has been ample reason to wonder if painting isn't now in danger of going the way of classical music—in danger, that is, of becoming a form of high culture which our mainstream institutions are in the process of marginalizing in the interest of serving a younger, larger, and less serious public whose tastes are largely determined by our degraded popular culture and its imbecilic mass media.

It is, moreover, an exhibition that significantly expands our understanding of the "new paintings" that Pissarro continued to create until the very last years of his long career. Many of the paintings in this show have rarely been exhibited before, and there are others, which remain in private hands, that have never been publicly exhibited before now. Some of these are so surprising that they are hardly recognizable as Pissarro's work—even, I may say, for a Pissarro buff like myself. This is particularly true of the late figure paintings—*The Young Maid* (1896), for example; the *Old Winegrower in Moret (Interior)* (1902); and, most astonishing of all, the *Elderly Woman Mending Old Clothes, Moret* (also 1902, when Pissarro was seventy-two), which, as painting, takes us right into the world of Vuillard, but a Vuillard who has gone to school to Millet and Van Gogh. This is a pictorial realm which it would never before have occurred to us to associate with Pissarro, yet the result is wholly original, wholly Pissarro. Neither the subject nor the feeling shows the least trace of Vuillard's romance with the over-upholstered world of bourgeois privacy. The scene in Pissarro is that of the dour existence of peasants and workers, yet the pictorial space is charted with a painterly architecture that is strikingly parallel to that of Vuillard's interiors and executed with a virtuosic handling which even Vuillard could not match. The "subtleties, passages, modulations, [and] mediation of contrasts," which Clement Greenberg observed in Pissarro's painting more than fifty years ago, fill every centimeter of the canvas with an unfailing masterly touch. The result is painting that breaks free of much that constituted Impressionist orthodoxy even for Pissarro. We are instead in the high tide of Post-Impressionist painting on its way to the early, pre-Fauve Matisse, whose first masterwork—*La Desserte* (1897)—is in so many respects an *hommage* to late Pissarro.

In thinking about the late paintings in the current Pissarro exhibition and the late "series" paintings in "The Impressionist and the City" of 1992–93, I am reminded once again of how far we have recently come in getting to know Pissarro and of the changes this has brought in our critical assessment of his achievement. The essay that Lionello Venturi devoted to Pissarro in his study of *Impressionists and Symbolists* (1950), for example, contains many marvelous observations of the man and his work. Above all, Venturi insisted that "although a convinced naturalist, [Pissarro] soon understood that art was not a subjection to the data of nature but rather an autonomous reality which differed from nature," and Venturi himself fully understood that "the efforts of our artists [that] are concentrated on the attainment of the autonomy of art" constituted one of the great projects of modernism. And while he also appreciated the depth of Pissarro's political sentiments, which were those of a libertarian anarchist—"a man of great heart," Venturi wrote of Pissarro, "he espoused the cause of the disinherited and considered himself one of them"—it was also observed that the artist "never stooped to use [his painting] as an instrument for achieving his moral and social ideals." Yet for all the sympathy and understanding that Venturi lavished on Pissarro, he was nonetheless moved to conclude that "Pissarro's absolute value as an artist is to be found in his works before 1880." That is a judgment which it is no longer possible to uphold.

Another issue that proved to be an extremely vexing one for an earlier generation of Pissarro's admirers was the artist's lifelong quest for a principle of "unity" in his painting. Clement Greenberg, in the 1944 article I have already cited, speaks of the "little masterpieces . . . to

be found complete in themselves in the dozen or so brushstrokes with which such a detail as a cab is indicated," then goes on to say that "it was only Pissarro's inhibiting preconception of unity that prevented him from treating the whole canvas in the same manner." Pissarro's artistic development is indeed haunted by his painstaking search for the kind of formal unity, or principle of pictorial integration, that would fully satisfy a fidelity to the imperative but unruly "sensations" which he derived from the observation of nature, and he spoke of the problem with his customary mixture of modesty, candor, and determination. "I started to understand my sensations, to know what I wanted," he wrote in 1890, "when I was in my forties, but only vaguely; when I was fifty, that is, in 1880, I had an inkling of the idea of unity, but I could not express it; at sixty, I am starting to see a way of expressing [it]." It was a search that caused him for a few years to surrender his pictorial practice to the stylistic innovations of the younger Seurat, which he then rejected but nonetheless learned a good deal from. It was that search, too, that turned him into the kind of painter who "never paints the same picture, who always paints a new picture." In the end, it was a search that, far from constituting an "inhibiting" obstacle to "treating the whole canvas" as a painterly unity, triumphantly achieved it. You can see that quality achieved in pictures as different from each other as the remarkable landscape called Flood, Twilight Effect, Eragny (1893)—another masterwork rarely before seen in public—and the Elderly Woman Mending Old Clothes, Moret. You could see dozens of examples, moreover, in the late "series" paintings that had been gathered for the first time in "The Impressionist and the City." Had Clement Greenberg been in a position to write about that exhibition, or had he lived to see the present one at the Jewish Museum, my guess is that he would have revised his judgment on this matter.

For what has changed our view of late Pissarro is not only our greater access to the masterpieces of the later years, but our understanding of the way that the idea of pictorial unity in painting has been altered by our vastly enlarged acquaintance with the late work of virtually all the Impressionist painters. Beginning in the 1950s, when the late paintings of Monet were first understood to have a formal unity that had far more in common with certain Abstract Expressionist paintings than with Monet's own earlier work, the notion of what constituted unity in a picture began to undergo a radical revision. Our greater familiarity with late Degas caused a similar change. What might roughly be called the model of late Cézanne on its way to becoming Cubism—the model that defined pictorial orthodoxy for a good many decades—was, perforce, supplanted by a more various range of possibilities, and the late paintings of Pissarro are now among the last works of the Impressionist generation to benefit from this revisionist attitude toward what is to be regarded as a legitimate principle of unity in painting. This is only one of the factors that has changed our appreciation of Pissarro's achievement, but it is an important one. To understand it, however, you have to be interested in the art of painting—for Pissarro remains today what he was for his own artist contemporaries, an artists' artist—and it is by no means certain that, even for an exhibition as fine as "Camille Pissarro: Impressionist Innovator," that interest remains a compelling one for the art public today.

Notes

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1. “Camille Pissarro: Impressionist Innovator,” organized by Joachim Pissarro and Stephanie Rachum, opened at the Jewish Museum, New York, on February 26, 1995, and remains on view through July 16. It was shown at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, from October 11, 1994, to January 9, 1995. An accompanying catalogue, with an essay by Joachim Pissarro called “Pissarro’s Memory” and a detailed chronology of the artist’s life by Stephanie Rachum, in both English and Hebrew, has been published by the Israel Museum (232 pages, $45 paper). Go back to the text.

Hilton Kramer (1928–2012) was the founding editor of *The New Criterion*, which he started with the late Samuel Lipman in 1982.

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