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The Honest Eye: Camille Pissarro's Impressionism

Camille Pissarro is considered one of the founders of the Impressionist movement in France. His artistic beginnings, however, lay in the Caribbean and South America. These roots were combined with a painterly interest in scenes of everyday rural life and a sympathy for anarchism.

Pissarro's motifs are often simple and restrained in tone. Only at second glance do we discover the charm of their attentively observed details and carefully orchestrated harmonies, qualities that arise from the artist's respectful gaze, idealism, open-mindedness, and love of experimentation. Thematically, his images range from landscapes and gardens to family portraits, scenes of peasant life, and urban motifs such as the ports of Normandy and the bustling streets of Paris.

With the seven paintings by Pissarro in the Hasso Plattner Collection as the point of departure, augmented by over 100 works from fifty international collections, the exhibition *The Honest Eye: Camille Pissarro's Impressionism* offers a well-grounded overview of Pissarro's entire oeuvre while also revealing the social-utopian ideas that informed his art. The show is presented in cooperation with the Denver Art Museum, with loans from numerous renowned collections in the United States such as the Art Institute of Chicago, the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the National Gallery in Washington, DC, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Other international lenders include the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Ordurpggaard, Copenhagen, the Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, the Courtauld and the National Gallery, London, and the Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

With Camille Pissarro, an outsider became a key figure in Impressionism. After making his earliest studies *en plein air* in the Caribbean and Venezuela, he introduced a new perspective, free from academic norms, to the circle of Parisian artists. He also played a decisive role as a networker: he worked alongside Claude Monet in the region around Paris, introduced Paul Cézanne to the group, and advocated for the work of Mary Cassatt. He was also open to the concerns of the Neo-Impressionists, and unlike Monet and Renoir also exhibited with these younger artists.

Beginnings in the Caribbean and Studies in France

Born in 1830 in Charlotte Amalie in what was then the Danish Antilles, Pissarro spent his childhood in a multicultural environment. As the son of a prosperous Jewish merchant

family with French-Portuguese roots, he belonged to the European minority of colonial officials and plantation owners. He maintained his Danish citizenship throughout his entire life. After completing his schooling in France, Pissarro spent two years traveling through Venezuela in the company of the Danish painter Fritz Melbye. A preference for scenes of nature and the simple life of the rural folk is already apparent in the early works created during this journey.

In 1855, Camille Pissarro moved to France. In search of a new, contemporary aesthetic, he enrolled at the private Académie Suisse in Paris, where he encountered like-minded artists such as Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne. Pissarro's paintings from his early Paris years are marked by a new interest in the direct experience of the everyday environment. Camille Corot proved to be an important mentor for the young artist, and in the 1860s Pissarro followed in the footsteps of the Barbizon School, painting *en plein air* in the forest of Fontainebleau.

Cofounder of Impressionism

With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Pissarro – a devoted father of eight children, five of whom reached adulthood – fled Paris with his family. In London, he met his later art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel and studied the works of John Constable and William Turner, a crucial stage in his search for a landscape painting marked by both realism and atmosphere.

When the family returned to France, Pissarro found that most of his works had been destroyed by soldiers. Despite the loss of over 1,000 pieces and only sporadic acceptance into the Paris Salon, Pissarro continued to pursue his art. He joined forces with fellow painters like Monet, Renoir, and Sisley, and together they organized the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874. Seven more exhibitions would follow until 1884; Pissarro was the only member of the group who participated in all eight shows. He also played an important role as an active networker, keeping the loosely affiliated group together, cultivating contacts, and suggesting new participants.

The characteristic Impressionist project of capturing sense experience on canvas was only a part of Pissarro's artistic approach. Rather, he frequently altered and interpreted his landscape motifs in accord with his social agenda. Everyday scenes from the industrial suburbs and provincial France bear witness to the painter's sensitivity to the upheavals of modernity. Pissarro developed a new image of the landscape, striving for compositional balance and harmony in every painting.

Pissarro as a Painter of Social Utopias

Politically, as well, Pissarro aspired to a society with equal rights for all. He read the writings of the anarchists Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin and discussed them with his sons. For them, the free self-organization of people in society offered the chance for a better life for all. Self-sufficient farmers played an important role in this regard: Pissarro, who himself lived in the country rather than the metropolis of Paris, depicted them again and again, presenting them with dignity and respect. He shows peasant men and women making hay, harvesting, planting, and sowing, integrated into the rhythm and cycle of the seasons. These images also embodied a social utopia – the dream of a self-determined life and communal work in harmony with nature.

And, in fact, for many years the vegetable garden cultivated by his wife Julie in Éragny-sur-Epte was essential to the Pissarro family's survival until they were able to live from the sale of the artist's works.

In 1885, Camille Pissarro's artistic development took a new turn when he encountered the younger painters Paul Signac and Georges Seurat. At first, he enthusiastically embraced their new, scientific technique of Divisionism. After four years, however, he abandoned this rigid, time-consuming system of color dissection and returned to a freer style of painting. Only late in his oeuvre did Pissarro turn his attention to the theme of the cityscape. In multiple series of paintings, he captured the hustle and bustle of the port cities of Rouen, Dieppe, and Le Havre in Normandy as well as the metropolis of Paris. The streets, squares, and bridges in his 125 views of the capital become a stage for the evocation of atmospheres: populated, shaped, and enlivened by countless individuals, they represent the active force Pissarro sought to document throughout his entire life with his quiet, reserved humanism.

The Uniqueness of Pissarro's Oeuvre

Camille Pissarro has long received considerably less attention than other artists associated with Impressionism. Ortrud Westheider, director of the Museum Barberini, notes: "Camille Pissarro was a father figure to many of the Impressionist artists, yet only in more recent times has his own oeuvre been more studied and appreciated in greater depth. In recent years, exhibitions like those in Williamstown and San Francisco, Ordrupgaard near Copenhagen, Basel, and Oxford have focused more strongly on Pissarro. The retrospective in Potsdam and Denver builds on these important stations in the research on Pissarro. With the seven works by Pissarro in the Hasso Plattner Collection as a point of departure and the outstanding collaboration of the Denver Art Museum, we show how Pissarro's Impressionism is closely tied to the group, but at the same time is also unique."

“It is Pissarro’s conception of the landscape, above all, that stands out among the Impressionists,” says Nerina Santorius, curator of the exhibition and collection director at the Museum Barberini. “While painters like Monet or Renoir usually showed the city and country as the setting for bourgeois leisure activities, Pissarro points our gaze to the way in which ordinary people shape and influence a variety of everyday landscapes – through the life and work of the individual in harmony with nature as well as through the movement of crowds in the metropolis. He depicts his wife Julie cultivating the garden, shows an experienced peasant woman starting a fire even with damp wood, and paints carriages stuck in rush hour traffic on a boulevard in Paris. One of Pissarro’s central artistic concerns was to show the beauty in the small things of everyday life.”

This exhibition is the second cooperation between the Museum Barberini and the Denver Art Museum, where the show will be presented from October 26, 2025, to February 8, 2026. In 2020, the two institutions mounted the major retrospective *Monet: Places*, bringing together numerous key works from all phases of Claude Monet’s oeuvre and for the first time examining the artist’s career from the perspective of his choice of location and awareness of place. Now, *The Honest Eye: Camille Pissarro’s Impressionism* emphasizes the deep humanity with which Pissarro encountered the present in all its unassuming aspects and invites viewers to discover his work with the same faculties of close observation that Pissarro himself used to capture his direct experience of everyday life on the canvas.

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