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Camille Pissarro

The Studio
of Modernism

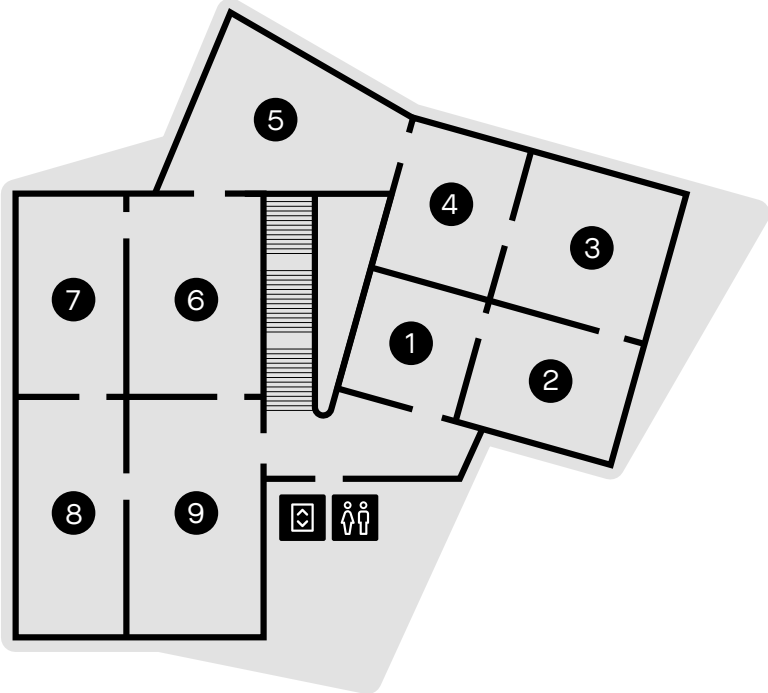


Unknown photographer, Camille Pissarro, c. 1901
© Archives Musée Camille-Pissarro, Pontoise

“Painting, art in general, enchants me. It is my life. What else matters? When you put all your soul into a work, all that is noble in you, you cannot fail to find a kindred soul who understands you, and you do not need a host of such spirits. Is not that all an artist should wish for?”

Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, Rouen,
20 November 1883, Letter 190 in: Janine Bailly-Herzberg (ed.),
Correspondence de Camille Pissarro, 5 vols.,
Paris 1980–1991 (here vol. 1, 1865–1885, Paris 1980).
English translation in Camille Pissarro, Letters to
His Son Lucien, John Rewald (ed., with Lucien Pissarro),
2nd edition, New York 1943, p. 47.

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Camille Pissarro

The Studio of Modernism

Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) was one of the most important painters of the nineteenth century. His work was marked by the pursuit of artistic progress. Pissarro's uncompromising dedication to art and his supportive nature made him a central figure for the other artists of his time. His friend included Mary Cassatt, Paul Cézanne, Claude Monet and Georges Seurat. The exhibition focuses on this complex web of relationships and its influence on art at the end of the nineteenth century.

1 Beginnings: To Paris!

Born into a family of Jewish merchants on the island of St Thomas in the West Indies, Pissarro was expected to join his parents in their shop. Instead, he decided to pursue an artist's career. On St Thomas he met the Danish painter Fritz Melbye, who encouraged Pissarro's artistic ambitions. The two set out for Venezuela, where they briefly lived and worked side by side. Returning to St Thomas, Pissarro soon felt a strong desire to be on the move again. In 1855 the young man definitively left his Caribbean homeland to settle in Paris. Here he sought to devote himself entirely to painting.

Pissarro refused academic training, although his parents had made this a precondition for his career path as an artist. Instead he sought role models among the painters of the so-called Barbizon School. Two of its leading members, Charles-François Daubigny and Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, exerted major influence on his work. Occasionally Pissarro even referred to himself as Corot's pupil.

Considered a forerunner of Impressionism, the Barbizon School took its name from the small village south of Paris where many of the artists worked. Here they traded the hallowed halls of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris for the fields and woods near the village. Daubigny for example set up his studio on a boat in order to paint directly on the water. Rather than pursue the salon-friendly subjects of history painting and mythology, they declared nature itself to be worthy of the canvas. The Impressionist movement would develop against this background.

Very few of the works Pissarro painted before 1870 still exist today. After the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, the Pissarro family left their house in Louveciennes near Paris and fled to London, where they spent the next year. During this time, Prussian troops took over the family home, destroying a large portion of Pissarro's early work in the process. Paintings dating before 1870 are thus extremely rare. Some of them are gathered in this room.

2 The Road to Impressionism

The 1860s found Camille Pissarro frequenting the so-called Académie Suisse in Paris, an open studio that one could attend for a nominal fee without having to pass exams or receive formal instruction. This was where many of painting's free spirits gathered at the time—either because they had not been admitted into the Academy or because they flatly rejected its teachings. Pissarro met some of his closest companions here, including Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne and Armand Guillaumin.

Pissarro and his friends were repeatedly rejected by the highly centralised art establishment. Their work was hardly ever shown at the most significant exhibition of the day, the annual Salon de Paris. In response, a small set of artists grouped around Pissarro and Claude Monet looked for alternative ways of presenting their work to the public. They formed the Société anonyme coopérative des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs, et graveurs (the cooperative association of painters, sculptors and engravers) and held their first independent exhibition in 1874. Their aim was to revolutionise both painting and the art market. The press contemporarily dubbed them 'Impressionists'.

The term referred to the style of painting as well as the subjects of the works. The painters sought to convey their immediate impressions of nature and particularly to capture the effects of light and atmosphere in their work. Compared to the weighty import of history painting and the crisp contours of academic painting, these works struck the contemporary public as pure impressions, sketch-like and at times banal. For example, the play of light and shadow on snow-covered streets and fields—although a subject that fascinated many painters in the group—failed to impress audiences of the day. It was only in 1877 that the artists themselves adopted the term Impressionism to describe their loose circle.

All told, eight group exhibitions were held through the year 1886. Pissarro was in fact the only artist to exhibit in all eight of these; never again would he submit a picture to the Paris Salon. The independently organized Impressionist exhibitions were not an economic success, however. Again and again the Pissarros had to seek refuge with their friend the painter Ludovic Piette on his farm in Montfoucault in Brittany. Here they found respite from the art market and freedom from existential worries associated with the pressing need to feed a growing family.

“The fashion was to treat Impressionism facetiously, to which it responds by sticking admirably to its convictions.”

Alexandre Hepp, “Impressionisme”,
Le Voltaire, 3 March 1882

3 Pissarro and Cézanne: A Legendary Friendship

Pissarro met Paul Cézanne at the Académie Suisse in the early 1860s and immediately recognised his artistic talent. Nine years Pissarro’s junior, Cézanne was ridiculed by many for his impetuous nature and southern dialect, which immediately betrayed his roots in Provence.

Important biographical parallels united the two painters. Both had defied the expectations of their bourgeois families in order to become artists. Both passionately fought the conventions of academic painting and the strictures of the Salon. Both were—and remained—outsiders in Paris.

Pissarro worked alongside a number of artists, but never with the same level of intensity as with Cézanne. He sought to make it possible for Cézanne to exhibit with the Impressionists. When Pissarro settled in Pontoise, northwest of Paris, in 1872, Cézanne and his lover Marie-Hortense Fiquet moved with their child to the village of Auvers-sur-Oise, a short walking distance away. Their collaboration reached its peak in the years that followed, and they spent much of their time painting side by side. They also held long discussions about technical and theoretical aspects of painting and occasionally tried out the same views and motifs. It was not until Cézanne returned permanently to Provence in 1885 that the collaboration came to an end, but their mutual appreciation would last throughout their lifetimes.

4 1 **Pissarro and Gauguin: Friendship and Collaboration**

At a time when Paul Gauguin was still an art collector and stockbroker, Pissarro supported his ambitions to become an artist, inviting him to take part in the Fourth Impressionist Exhibition in 1879. In the same year Gauguin visited Pissarro at Pontoise outside Paris for the first time and they painted together. A few years later, however, the two artists grew apart and their creative paths diverged. Pissarro criticised Gauguin's pronounced interest in financial success and pursuit of public recognition. In 1891 the younger artist left Paris and his family in order to lead a simple, "primitive" life in the South Seas. Pissarro expressed deep disappointment in Gauguin's evolution from Impressionism to a highly idealised form of Symbolism, a tendency he vehemently rejected. He saw in Symbolism a dangerous return to religiosity and sentimentality in art, evidence of the reactionary political attitudes fostered by the French Catholic Church.

*"Old Pissarro was a father to me.
He was someone to go to for advice
and something like the good Lord."*

Paul Cézanne, cited in Jules Borély,
"Cézanne à Aix," in: Chroniques de l'Art Vivant,
July 1926, p. 492

4 2 Pissarro, Cassatt, Degas and Impressionist printmaking

Pissarro shared a keen interest in printmaking with Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas. Degas had invited Cassatt to join the Impressionists in 1877. The American artist, who had already achieved success with her paintings and pastel drawings, now began working with Degas to deepen her printmaking skills. Eventually, in 1879 she took part in the Fourth Impressionist Exhibition. The three artists shared tips on techniques and together explored new ways of imbuing the medium of printmaking with the effects of light and atmosphere that were so important to the Impressionists. The prints they produced in 1879 for the journal *Le Jour et la nuit* marked the high point of their collaboration, although the journal was never published. The art of etching was experiencing a renaissance as an art form in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Impressionists were intrigued by its possibilities of being valued as an original medium with plenty of room for improvisation. Cassatt, Degas and Pissarro constantly sought new techniques and sometimes even developed their own tools. Degas and Pissarro both experimented with colour prints. Cassatt, inspired by the Japanese woodblock prints that were exhibited in Paris in 1890, achieved hitherto unknown mastery in this area. Her audacious technical innovation and sensitive depictions of bourgeois women in everyday situations earned her the admiration of Pissarro and Degas alike.

5 Anarchism in Paris

Pissarro was a committed anarchist. He read widely on the subject, vigorously defended his political views at Impressionist dinners and café meetings, and supported anarchist journals with gifts of money and works of art. The anarchist movement advocated for a society free of domination and criticised the precarious living conditions of urban workers in particular. This was the theme of Pissarro's *Turpitudes sociales*, a private album of satirical drawings created as a gift for his nieces. It is a unique testimony to his political views.

“This is the painting of democrats, of those who don’t change their linen, who want to put themselves over on men of the world; this art displeases me and disgusts me.”

Alfred Émilien O’Hara, Comte de Nieuwerkerke (president of the Jury of the Beaux-Art section at the World Fair 1855) regarding the painters of Barbizon, in: John Rewald, *History of Impressionism*, New York 1961, p. 18

6 New Ground: Pissarro and Neo-Impressionism

In the early 1880s Pissarro found himself in an artistic crisis. In addition to doubting his own painting, the persistent lack of art market success left him demoralized. He drew close to the circle of artists around Georges Seurat, who was in the process of developing a radical new painting technique. Inspired by new developments in the fields of optics and colour theory, Seurat and his followers stopped mixing their colours on the painter's palette. Instead, the so-called Neo-Impressionists applied small dot-like brushstrokes of unmixed colour directly onto the canvas ("Pointillism"). These dots, points or strokes were to combine in the eye and mind of the viewer, thus yielding particularly brilliant and luminous colour tones. Neo-Impressionism, after Impressionism, was the second revolution in painting to which Pissarro contributed. His change in direction earned him harsh criticism and brought him—not for the first time—to the brink of financial ruin. The Neo-Impressionist aesthetic—and technique—was immensely time-consuming. No longer able to paint spontaneously outdoors, Pissarro could now only create his pictures through painstaking studio work. His dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, moreover refused to offer the new works for sale. Pissarro strove to include the Neo-Impressionists in the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition of 1886—to the dismay of the group's core members. It was ultimately decided that Pissarro would exhibit in a separate room alongside Signac, Seurat and his son Lucien Pissarro. The Impressionists succumbed to tensions over the direction and make-up of the group and never again held another joint exhibition. In the 1890s Pissarro abandoned the strict framework of Neo-Impressionism; the Pointillist technique and the systematic dismantling of individual colours were ultimately at odds with his own deep desire to capture his spontaneous sensations in paint.

7 “Un artiste complet”: Pissarro’s Many Talents

Working on paper was an essential part of Pissarro’s artistic practice. He used a variety of materials and media—from pencil, pastel and watercolour to drypoint, lithography and monotype—and experimented constantly with new subjects and forms of expression. He also worked with different types of papers and different formats. Hardly any of his sketchbooks were of the same size. This love of experimentation and openness to all things new could well be traced back to his lack of classical academic training.

The act of drawing was especially important to Pissarro and his oeuvre. He trained his hand to capture a wide variety of subjects in order to keep his artist’s eye fresh. Pissarro also placed great emphasis on drawing in the artistic educations of his sons. He advised his son Lucien to draw from memory so he could move beyond pure observation.

Nearly all his major figure compositions are based on detailed preliminary studies made from life. Because models were expensive and seldom easy to hire outside Paris, however, he made use of the same studies again and again for different paintings.

“What do people know of this old Impressionist’s lifestyle? He has settled in the depths of Normandy, on a patch of land that he himself farms and he lives off the products of the soil he tills. When the harvest has been good and work in the fields leaves him free, Pissarro takes up his brushes, looks around him and sets down on the canvas the harsh existence of rural beings and things – a life that is also his. And, above all, never any sacrifices to ‘art’, never any compromises! Pissarro would never renounce a shade he had glimpsed merely in order to please a picture dealer... Even if he wished to, he would be prevented by his sons, those zealots of nature, who constitute a sort of council-chamber around him (...).”

Hugues Leroux, La République française,
17 May 1886

8 1 The “School of Éragny”

In 1884, Pissarro moved with his family to Éragny near Normandy. The small village was further from the Parisian art scene than nearly anywhere he had lived before. He would henceforth spend less and less time in the capital—with no ill effect on his productivity. It was here that the family found its permanent home. The Pissarros at first rented their house. When the opportunity to purchase it arose, Madame Pissarro reacted quickly, asking Claude Monet behind her husband’s back for the sum necessary for the down payment. With the house purchased, Pissarro converted an old barn on the property into his studio. There was also room here for a printing press.

The Pissarros grew into a family of artists. The years following the move were for Camille Pissarro above all a time of intensive exchange with his four grown sons. Lucien (1863–1944), Georges (1871–1961), Félix (1874–1897) and Ludovic Rodolphe (“Ludovic-Rodo”, 1878–1952). They were already active at this time either as artists or craftsmen—a situation that caused no small concern to their mother, who was all too familiar with the pecuniary downside of the profession. While his sons hewed closely in their early years to their father’s Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist works, they later developed their own artistic languages. The fifth and youngest son, Paul-Émile Pissarro (1884–1972), also learned drawing and painting within the family circle. Pissarro worked on tapestries with his daughter Jeanne (1881–1948, nicknamed “Cocotte”), who was the only daughter of three to survive into adulthood. Madame Pissarro was able to assert herself where Jeanne’s upbringing was concerned, insisting on a traditional boarding school education that would prepare her for the roles of housewife and mother.

Overall, however, Camille and Julie Pissarro cultivated a comparatively progressive educational ideal for their family. They treated their children as independent beings and strove to meet them on the same level. As parents they encouraged the talents and interests of their children as best they could. The whole family granted high importance to the principal of exchange among equals. Although their own circumstances were almost always straitened, the Pissarros always supported their children financially.

8 2 Pissarro is famous as a painter of rural life. He was one of the few Impressionists to devote himself to landscape painting and figure painting in equal measure. Human figures began to take centre stage in his landscapes around 1880. Pissarro returned to the theme after he had abandoned the Pointillist technique, creating portrait-like stagings of country folk—above all women—hard at work or resting. At the centre of his monumental figure compositions are the people themselves. Pissarro sought a way to convey the beauty and dignity of strenuous life in the countryside.

“I have just finished my series of paintings and I look at them a great deal; I painted them and I sometimes find them horrible; I do have moments when I understand them, long after making them, when I’ve forgotten all about them, one day when I am well-disposed and sufficiently indulgent toward the poor painter. I sometimes have the most terrible funk when turning a picture round; I’m always afraid I shall find a monster instead of the precious jewel I thought I’d made!”

Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, Rouen,
20 November 1883, Letter 190 in: Janine Bailly-Herzberg
(ed.), *Correspondence de Camille Pissarro*, 5 vols.,
Paris 1980–1991 (here vol. 1, 1865–1885, Paris 1980).

9 City and Harbour Scenes

In the last ten years of his life, Pissarro painted several series of city and harbour views. By this time a chronic eye condition had made it nearly impossible for him to paint outdoors, and he had to avoid exposure to wind and dust. He would regularly take a hotel room or an apartment for a few weeks or months—in cities such as Paris, Rouen, Dieppe and Le Havre—and observe the comings and goings on the streets below. The elevated window view offered Pissarro an optimal vantage point, allowing him to paint precisely the same subject at different times of day and under a range of different lighting and weather conditions. Some of these pictures show the unmistakable influence of Monet, who in 1884 exhibited his Rouen Cathedral series at the gallery of their art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. These works left a lasting impression on Pissarro. Even as his career drew to a close, his fascination for light and atmosphere continued to spur him on to new painterly paths. These late works were the first to bring Pissarro the art market success he had long sought, at last assuring him a reasonably reliable income.

Pissarro's network

Pissarro possessed a talent for networking and collaboration. Throughout his life he sought exchange with other artists, always trying his best to support them. In turn, the Pissarro family also survived the worst financial crises only thanks to the help of those around them. The most important companions in Pissarro's life are briefly introduced below.

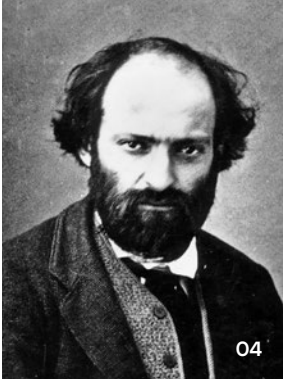


01 As soon as he arrived in Paris in 1855, Camille Pissarro discovered the paintings of **Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot** at that year's World's Fair. He soon sought out the experienced painter, visiting him frequently in his studio. At times Pissarro even called himself Corot's pupil.

02 As a member of the jury for the Paris Salon, the Barbizon painter **Charles-François Daubigny** supported the members of Pissarro's circle, albeit often in vain, when they submitted their pictures to the salon. It was Daubigny who introduced Pissarro as well as Claude Monet to the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel.



03 Not only were Pissarro and the American artist **Mary Cassatt** both "outsiders" in France. They were also united in their appreciation of Japanese woodblock prints. Cassatt, who came from a well-to-do social circle, also paved the way for Pissarro's positive reception in the United States, recommending him and his group to art-loving friends and relatives back home.



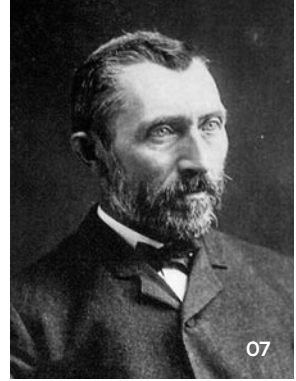
04 The friendship between Pissarro and **Paul Cézanne** is among the most important in the history of art. Not only did they often work together in front of the same subject but they also inspired and motivated each other as they sought out new and utterly original forms of painting.



06 The young **Paul Gauguin** initially found an important mentor in Pissarro, although he later took a markedly different course. Gauguin became one of the leading representatives of Symbolist painting, which Pissarro dismissed as showmanship.



05 **Edgar Degas** and Pissarro shared a keen interest in printmaking. The human figure was another central aspect in the work of both artists. Although the Dreyfus Affair introduced discord into their relationship, Pissarro continued to express his admiration for Degas's art.

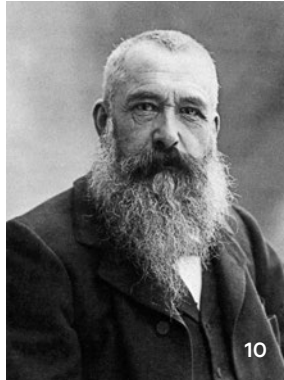


07 It is likely that Pissarro first came into contact with **Vincent van Gogh** through Vincent's brother Theo, who was active in Paris as an art dealer. The two painters shared an unwavering desire to break new ground in art. Van Gogh trusted Pissarro's judgment, including his referral to Dr Paul Gachet, a medical doctor and art lover.



08 Armand Guillaumin met Pissarro in the early 1860s. Driven by their financial troubles, the two occasionally made ends meet by painting shutter doors and shop signs. While in Pontoise they worked together with Cézanne on the printing press owned by Dr Paul Gachet in nearby Auvers-sur-Oise.

10 Claude Monet met Pissarro in the early 1860s. Together they served as the driving force founding Impressionism. Unlike Pissarro, who basically remained penniless throughout his life, Monet began achieving greater financial success in the mid 1880s.



11 Lucien Pissarro, the eldest son of Camille Pissarro and Julie Vellay, embarked on an artist's career—despite his mother's attempts to discourage him. He also shared his father's political convictions. From 1890 Lucien lived in London, where his father visited him regularly.



09 Maximilien Luce came into touch with Georges Seurat and his Neo-Impressionist group through Camille and Lucien Pissarro. Luce, like them, was a convinced anarchist and found a fatherly friend in Pissarro.

12 Ludovic Piette met Pissarro in the early 1860s, and the two artists developed a deep friendship, which extended to their families. The Pissarros often visited the Piettes at their farm, Montfoucault.





15 Alfred Sisley met Pissarro through Claude Monet. Sisley remained true to the Impressionist style until the end of his life. Like Pissarro, he had no financial success during his lifetime. Hardship forced him to keep trying his luck with the official salons, but he never won the success he sought.



13 Georges Seurat began developing a new painting technique in the mid 1880s. Pissarro recognized the potential of the new style and made overtures to the much younger Seurat and his circle—a step that earned him criticism from his contemporaries.



16 The other Pissarro sons—**Ludovic-Rodo, Félix, Georges** und **Paul-Émile**—chose like their older brother Lucien to become artists. Their father was an important source of support and point of reference for them.



14 Paul Signac was part of Georges Seurat's Neo-Impressionist circle and took over its de facto leadership after Seurat's untimely death. Like Pissarro, Signac was a dyed-in-the-wool anarchist.

PISSARRO | SOUNDS

Created by artist Moritz Fehr, PISSARRO | SOUNDS offers a novel immersive audio experience. The second half of the exhibition invites us to dive into a series of changing soundscapes. These sound environments refer to real sites; numerous recordings were made at the locations where Pissarro lived and worked. PISSARRO | SOUNDS also incorporates recorded letters from the artist and his contemporaries as well as the words of art critics.

This work of sound art is the first public application of the *Immersive Audio Guiding System* (IAGS), a research project sponsored by the Swiss Innovation Agency Innosuisse and developed by the research department of the Hochschule für Musik FHNW, iart – Studio for Media Architectures and idee & Klang Audio Design.

Photocredits "Pissarro's network"

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