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An Intimate Exhibition That Rewards the Keen Eye

 By **DANA GORDON**

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New York

Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) was the linchpin of the French painting avant-garde from the 1860s until his death, and revered in his time. Paul Cézanne called him "colossal" and said that "we are all derived from Pissarro." Vincent van Gogh declared him "the father of us all."

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1

In the 20th century, Pissarro was obscured by his protégé Cézanne, whose work was seen as the underpinning of modern painting. But an essentially reductivist art followed from Cézanne, mining fundamental veins but ending in a played-out minimalism. Pissarro's art, on the

other hand is the more inclusive, full and complete. For example, Cézanne's emphasis on paintstrokes on the canvas surface keeps your attention there. Pissarro invites you in.

Pissarro traditionally was known as a great landscapist, a translator of nature into art. But this nature was not limited to what was arrayed in front of him, nor even to the nature of the artist. Pissarro discovered a new subject central to art: the nature of the medium itself. He showed that all of painting's basic qualities -- colors, brushstrokes, materiality, lines, shapes, composition -- were meaningful in their own right, and in their potential to transform paint into purely visual poetry, as well as into illusionistic pictures. He was, in essence, the first abstract artist.

Throughout most of the 20th century Pissarro's significance remained almost underground, but clues surfaced from time to time. Alfred Werner, the Viennese-American art critic, wrote in Commentary in 1954 that Pissarro was "the least compromising of the Impressionists." Clive Bell, the influential English art theorist of Bloomsbury vintage, was "tempted to rank him with the very greatest artists." Barnett

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Newman -- an artist central to post-World War II American artists' pursuit of purely visual expression -- considered Pissarro his favorite artist. Since 1980, several major exhibitions have revealed Pissarro's large role in the history of art, the unsurpassed quality of his work, and his far reaching modernity.

"Camille Pissarro: Impressions of City and Country," at the Jewish Museum here, is modest in scope, with about 50 works. Yet blockbusters are not essential; Pissarro's oeuvre is one continuous painting project as much as it is a series of distinct works. This part of his modernity is emphasized by the show's curator, Karen Levitov, when she notes in the museum's news release that "Pissarro's continual artistic experimentation revolutionized late nineteenth-century art."

As early as "Sous Bois," an 1862 chalk on paper, abstraction dominates the composition. The light and dark verticals against a background of rough organic shapes in varied techniques comes across before the scene itself does. Broad geometries are emphasized in "Houses at L'Hermitage, Pontoise" (1874).

Expressive, colorful brushwork is set against a linear construction in "The Brook at Montbuisson" (1869). "The Climbing Path" (1875) offers one of the most wildly complex compositions you'll find in New York.

"The Chateau de Busagny, Osny" (1884) portrays the scent of crisp winter air. Stay awhile, and feel a direct conduit between art and spirit. Maybe you are conveyed by the Zen-like endless attentiveness of Pissarro's brush touching the surface in so many ways; it's a mysterious painting with great presence. Paintings of an 1893 flood are so utterly modern and fresh they could have been painted yesterday. Color fields are delicately divided into paintstroke clusters, smaller against larger, strokes differentiated by color, direction, scale and fluidity. Varying pressures of the brush and fine distinctions of intense color reward the keen eye. The briefest calligraphies poise against color rippling with daring smears.

The show's intimacy is part of its draw. Pissarro had no need to shout, and his greatness can be discerned -- perhaps can only be discerned -- in the time you must spend trying to fathom one of his paintings.

His art exists in an unusually demanding, highly rewarding sphere. It orchestrates time as well as space in pure form, as you move through a work and ponder the wealth of abstract events and sensuous qualities, the depictions, the many types of space, and the interplay among these elements. And, while there is much to be gotten from a normal viewing distance, you must spend some of this time up close. Often, many different types of form are combined, an essay of lines, a pattern of organic shapes, an arrangement of geometric forms. the technique can be lush, dry, heavy, light. And even closer, each individual brushstroke, dab or smear of paint is a note in both a local composition and in the overall symphony.

Thus, extraordinarily, Pissarro brings you into the painting and then addresses you directly -- in a true visual dialogue. This intimate, direct contact with the artist's thought process via his minute, dextrous, painterly notation is a real-time, real experience, not a description, not a narrative, and certainly not virtual. Pissarro achieves this very modern interaction without abandoning other artistic qualities validated over many centuries.



The Jewish Museum, New York

"The Chateau de Busagny, Osny" portrays the scent of crisp winter air

Pissarro's legendary empathy is carried by this language of form, which is how his work can have such full human feeling without being sentimental or resorting to a singular, cutting expressionism or "transgression." The humanity and the formal genius raise each other.

Pissarro the individualist was interested in anarchism. This much is true. But it has led some commentators on art, including the curator of the show in her wall texts and the catalog essay, to flights of fancy. They shanghai the artist into the political camp, depicting him as the creator of a narrative, rather than a visual, art.

"For Pissarro," the catalog tells us, "the work of painting was closely tied to his anarchist leanings . . . embodied in the radicalism of his technique." But, in reality, Pissarro was adamantly against narrative sentimentalism in art and knew very well that politics in art is a form of this. He kept it out of his work.

We are told, too, that Pissarro lived in the countryside and painted figures embedded in landscape because of his socialist alliance with the peasant. But, in fact, Pissarro lived outside of Paris because he needed a place where he could afford to raise his family. As a painter of landscapes, he needed easy proximity to landscapes. His figures were embedded in a field of colored brushstrokes as part of an overall abstract painting technique. And is every woman -- for they are mostly women -- in a field or garden or market a "peasant"?

And then there is the catalog's assertion that the "technical innovations he pursued went against the established conventions of painting of the time and are thus connected with Pissarro's overall anti-establishment philosophy." Surely Edgar Degas and Edouard Manet were also innovators in technique, but they were the very embodiment of the establishment.

If you don't read the wall texts or catalog, you can be moved overwhelmingly by Pissarro's feeling, intelligence and inventive dexterity of expression -- the thrill of beauty and of great art. If you focus instead on the boilerplate, you risk being dragged down into the post-modern morass that reduces the artist to a pawn and painting to propaganda.

Mr. Gordon is a visual artist and writer based in New York. His writing has been published in Commentary and the New York Sun as well as the Journal.

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The Jewish Museum, New York

Expressive, colorful brushwork is set against a linear construction in "The Brook at Montbuisson."

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