

Camille Pissarro: *Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon, Effect of Rain, 1897*

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Fig. 1
The Place du Havre, Paris, 1893
 Oil on canvas, 60.1 × 73.5 cm
 The Art Institute of Chicago, Potter Palmer
 Collection [PDR 986]

Pissarro was the only Impressionist artist who systematically represented the rural landscape of France. Throughout his long career, he painted the towns where he lived (including Louveciennes, Pontoise, and Éragny) and their fields and small orchards—to the extent that his detractors called him “the cabbage painter” (*le peintre de choux*). Nevertheless, in the last decade of his life, between 1893 and 1903, his activity as a painter focussed on urban landscapes. He created over three hundred canvases depicting Paris, Rouen, Dieppe, and Le Havre.¹ Other Impressionists before him, like Renoir, Monet, and Caillebotte, executed views of Paris, but none of them created works of this type with such consistency and in such large numbers. The painting in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza collection titled *Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon, Effect of Rain* [fig. 10], from 1897, is a magnificent example, and for this reason we are devoting an article to the work in this issue of our online publication, *Open Windows*.

The series

In early 1891, Camille Pissarro criticized Monet for his repetitive series of haystacks, and yet, by the year’s end, he himself came to recognize the enormous possibilities afforded by working in series.² His initial misgivings about Monet’s commercial success—feelings perhaps tinged by a degree of envy—gradually gave way to a growing interest in exploring a single subject under the changing effects of the seasons, the weather, and light, viewed from different angles and perspectives and in various formats. In late May of 1895, Pissarro visited the exhibition of Monet’s *Cathedrals* at the Durand-Ruel gallery, and he came away fascinated by the experience. He wrote to his eldest child, Lucien, urging him to come from London to Paris so as not to miss seeing the complete series, for this would be the only opportunity to do so before it was sold off as individual paintings: “I’m bowled over by the extraordinary mastery. Cézanne, whom I met yesterday at Durand’s, agrees that it’s the work of a strong-willed man, well-thought-out, pursuing the imperceptible nuance of effects that no other artist I can think of has achieved”.³

Two years before this letter, in 1893, Pissarro began his first urban series depicting Paris, in the neighbourhood of Saint-Lazare. That spring he was obliged to remain in the capital in order to receive daily treatment for an abscess in one eye. Following the advice of his physician, Doctor Parenteau, who recommended he not expose it to the wind and dust of the streets, the painter rented a room in the Hôtel-Restaurant de Rome. From the window of his strategically situated studio, he painted four views of rue Saint-Lazare, the place du Havre [Fig. 1], rue d’Amsterdam, and the Saint-Lazare train station (where he would arrive when he travelled to Paris from Éragny).

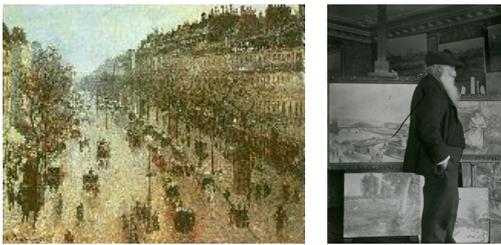


Fig. 2
The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning, 1897
Oil on canvas, 64.8 × 81.3 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Katrin S. Vietor, in loving memory of Ernest G. Vietor, 1960 (60.174) [PDR 1160]

Fig. 3
The painter in his apartment on Rue de Rivoli, ca. 1900
Musée Pissarro Archives, Pontoise



Fig. 4
The Louvre, Afternoon, Rainy Weather, 1900
Oil on canvas, 66.5 × 81.5 cm
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Edward C. and Mary Walker Collection [PDR 1346]



Fig. 5
Tuileries Gardens, 1900
Oil on canvas, 73.6 × 92.3 cm
Glasgow Life (Glasgow Museums) on behalf of Glasgow City Council. Presented by Sir John Richmond, 1948 [PDR 1310]



Fig. 6
The Pont-Neuf, 1902
Oil on canvas, 55 × 46.5 cm
Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest [PDR 1415]



Fig. 7
Self-Portrait, 1903
Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
Tate: Presented by Lucien Pissarro, the artist's son, 1931 [PDR 1528]

He thus initiated a model of series paintings that he would undertake on eleven occasions: in Rouen (1896, 1898), Dieppe (1901, 1902), Le Havre (1903), and above all Paris (1892–93, 1897, 1898, 1899, 1900–3). Pissarro was encouraged by his dealer, Durand-Ruel, who for the first time bought his views en bloc, as well as by Lucien: “What a good idea you had to install yourself in Paris. This will make you more successful in the eyes of the Parisians who love their city, when all’s said and done, not to mention the enjoyment you’ll get from this thoroughly new series”.⁴

In January 1897, Pissarro returned to the same hotel in Saint-Lazare. Afterwards, from 8 February to 25 April, he lived on boulevard Montmartre, in the Grand Hôtel de Russie, which also looked onto boulevard des Italiens and where he painted sixteen canvases [fig. 2]. In late 1897 and early 1898, he executed his series of the place du Théâtre-Français, which I shall discuss in further detail below.

From early 1899 to the summer of 1900, he focussed on the Tuileries Gardens and the Louvre, painting a total of twenty-one works [figs. 4 and 5], from his apartment on rue de Rivoli [fig. 3], where he was living with his wife, Julie, and his young children, Cocotte and Paul-Émile, during the autumn and winter months. During the summer they moved to Éragny.

For his long painting campaign at the place Dauphine from 1900 to 1903, he rented an apartment near the Pont-Neuf with views of both banks of the Seine. He painted a total of sixty works [fig. 6], divided into three series, along with a fourth and final series that he painted from a hotel on the quai Voltaire in May 1903.

Unfortunately, in September 1903, when Pissarro and his family were preparing to move to a new apartment on boulevard Morland, where the artist was to begin a new series, he fell ill and died shortly thereafter. It was precisely at the place Dauphine that he created his last self-portrait, at the age of seventy-three, with the Samaritaine building in the background.

Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon, Effect of Rain, 1897

But let us return to 1897, an extremely difficult year for the artist. His son, Lucien, suffered a stroke, and Pissarro moved to London from May to July to be by his side while he recovered. In the autumn, the family experienced another misfortune when his fifth child, Félix (“Titi”) [fig. 8], died on 15 November from tuberculosis when he was only twenty-three. The painter could not travel again to London, to the Blenheim House sanatorium in Kew where Félix was a patient, so Julie travelled there in his stead.

In December of that year, Pissarro painted *Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon, Effect of Rain* [fig. 10], barely a month after Félix’s death.



Fig. 8
From left to right:
Camille and his
sons Ludovic-
Rodolphe, Lucien,
and Félix in
Knokke, 1894.
Musée Pissarro
Archives, Pontoise



Fig. 9
Avenue de l'Opéra, Paris



Fig. 10
Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon, Effect of Rain, 1897
Oil on canvas, 81 × 65 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid [PDR 1196]
[\[+ info\]](#)

From 4 to 22 December, he travelled to Paris, where he stayed at the Hôtel Garnier. He sought out new locations for his paintings and found a room in the Grand Hôtel du Louvre [fig. 9]: “I neglected to mention that I found a room at the Grand Hôtel du Louvre with a superb view of the avenue de l’Opéra and the corner of the place du Palais Royal! —It will be very beautiful to paint! It may not be very aesthetic, but I’m delighted to be able to have a go at Paris streets, which are said to be ugly, but are so silvery, so bright, so vibrant with life, they’re altogether different from the boulevards—they’re totally modern!!!”⁵

He began to work conscientiously, perhaps so as to escape the pain caused by Titi’s death, as his letter to his son dated Wednesday, 15 December 1897 would suggest: “My dear Lucien: I received your letter and Esther’s. I cannot tell you how relieved I am that you have been able to face the terrible news of the death of our poor Titi, whom we loved so. [...] So, my dear Lucien, let us work in order to heal our wounds. I hope you remain strong and that you can shield yourself, so to speak, with art.”⁶

Immediately before returning to Éragny to spend a gloomy Christmas with his family, Pissarro painted two canvases from his new studio in 1897: *Place du Théâtre-Français, Fog Effect*, now in the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza’s *Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon, Effect of Rain*, which represents the intersection of rue Saint-Honoré with the place du Théâtre-Français. In the foreground on the left, we see rue de Rohan, which leads into rue de Rivoli and ends at the Musée du Louvre. The country roads that were such a common feature of his rural compositions have become the modern streets, boulevards, and avenues of the metropolis.

On 5 January 1898, he settled in the Grand Hôtel du Louvre, and he would remain at 172 rue de Rivoli for four months, working on a total of fifteen views. In May, Durand-Ruel bought twelve canvases from the series, which he described as “very successful”.⁷ These are open, spacious compositions that present variations of snow, rain, fog, and vegetation, in the winter and springtime. A month later, his dealer exhibited these works in his gallery and encouraged Pissarro to continue painting birds-eye views of urban landscapes, for they sold well. The artist finally attained the commercial success that he had yearned for and could continue to support his family, settle his debts, and live in greater ease.

During this last period of his artistic career after he turned sixty-eight, and despite the problems with his sight that obliged him to make frequent appointments with his doctor in Paris, Pissarro seemed to rejuvenate. He found the energy necessary to work with great intensity, painting works like *Place du Théâtre-Français, Fog Effect* in a single day. Signac describes a visit to Pissarro’s studio on 11 February 1898: “I expected to see him more grief-stricken at the death of Félix and



Fig. 11
Camille Pissarro in Rouen, standing before
the Hôtel d'Angleterre and wearing a black
armband possibly in mourning for Félix, 1898
Musée Pissarro Archives, Pontoise

the illness of Lucien. He has an admirable philosophy and a serene resignation. He is more vigorous than ever, works with enthusiasm and talks ardently about the Zola affair. When one compares the old age of this artist, who is all activity and work, with the gloomy, senile extinction of the old men of independent means and the pensioners, what a reward art has in store for us!"⁸

After having worked in the French countryside and lived in its tranquil, traditional towns for most of his life, Pissarro—*humble and colossal*, as Cézanne described him—found a growing fascination with cities and incipient industrialization: smoke, movement, activity. This adaptation to modernity is reflected in his choice of subjects as well as in the serial method with which he now painted, a method that perfectly suited his needs, for the variations in atmosphere and effects that he could discover in a single motif or locale were practically endless: "You know that the motifs are of entirely secondary interest to me: What I consider is the atmosphere and the effects."⁹

Notes

- 1 Richard R. Brettell: "Camille Pissarro and Urban View Painting: An Introduction", in Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro: *The Impressionist and the City: Pissarro's Series Paintings*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. XV.
- 2 As Joachim Pissarro points out in "Monet / Pissarro in the 1890s: Serial Racing," in *Pissarro*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2013), p. 45.
- 3 "Je suis très emballé par cette maîtrise extraordinaire. Cézanne, que j'ai rencontré hier chez Durand, est bien de mon avis que c'est l'œuvre d'un volontaire, bien pondéré, poursuivant l'insaisissable nuance des effets que ne vois réalisée par aucun artiste." Letter to Lucien Pissarro, 26 May 1895, in *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, ed. Janine Bailly-Herzberg, 5 vols. (Saint-Ouen l'Aumône: Valhermeil, 1991), vol. 4, p. 75, no. 1138.
- 4 "Quelle bonne idée tu as eu de t'installer à Paris, cela va relever ton succès aux yeux des parisiens, qui n'aime que leur ville, au fond, sans compter le plaisir que te donnera cette série si nouvelle". *The Letters of Lucien to Camille Pissarro (1883–1903)*, ed. Anne Thorold (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 529.
- 5 "J'oublie de t'annoncer que j'ai trouvé une chambre au Grand Hôtel du Louvre avec une vue superbe sur l'avenue de l'Opéra et du coin de la place du Palais Royal! —C'est très beau à faire! C'est peut-être pas très esthétique, mais je suis enchanté de pouvoir essayer de faire ces rues de Paris que l'on a l'habitude [de] dire laides, mais qui sont si argentées, si lumineuses et si vivantes, c'est tout différent des boulevards—c'est le moderne en plein!!!" *Correspondance*, vol. 4, no. 1489, n3.
- 6 Camille Pissarro and Lucien Pissarro, *Camille y Lucien Pissarro: Cartas 1883–1903* (Madrid: Lamicro, 2013), p. 100.
- 7 "Très réussie". *Correspondance*, note 3, vol. 4, n. 1528.
- 8 John Rewald, "Extraits du journal inédit de Paul Signac, II (1897–98)", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (April 1952), pp. 275–76.
- 9 "Tu sais que les motifs sont tout à fait secondaires pour moi: ce que je considère c'est l'atmosphère et les effets". Letter to his son, Rodolphe, Le Havre, 6 July 1903, in *Correspondance*, vol. 5, p. 352n3.