

Media release  
Basel, May 2021

**Camille Pissarro**  
**The Studio of Modernism**

September 4, 2021–January 23, 2022, Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau  
Curators: Christophe Duvivier, Josef Helfenstein

*"(...) we may all come out of Pissarro. He had the luck to be born in the Antilles, there he learned drawing without a master. He told me all about it. In 1865 he was already cutting out black, bitumen, raw sienna and the ochers. That's a fact. Never paint with anything but the three primary colors and their derivatives, he used to say to me. Yes, he was the first Impressionist."*

Paul Cézanne, "Conversations avec Cézanne"

Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) ranks among the most distinguished artists of nineteenth-century France. A central figure in Impressionism, he exerted considerable influence over the movement's evolution. *Camille Pissarro. The Studio of Modernism* at the Kunstmuseum Basel is the artist's first retrospective in Switzerland in over six decades. It combines a comprehensive survey of Pissarro's oeuvre with a spotlight on his collaborative practice and his key role in paving the way for modernism. The exhibition pays tribute to an artist whose achievements are too often overshadowed in histories of the art of the nineteenth century by those of his more prominent colleagues. Artists from several generations, some of whom went on to become leading modernists around the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, trusted his counsel as a friend and mentor. The presentation sheds light on Pissarro's sustained exchanges of ideas with them and contextualizes his diverse oeuvre with works by Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Mary Cassatt, and others. A panoramic display of the birth of modern art, the exhibition thus also narrates a story outside the art-historical mainstream.

Exhibitions of Impressionist art have a long tradition at the Kunstmuseum Basel. Pissarro is especially dear to us, as our collections include eight of his paintings as well as ten drawings and watercolors and ten prints by his hand. *Un coin de l'Hermitage, Pontoise* (1878) was the first Impressionist painting to enter the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, the public art collection of Basel. Its acquisition in 1912 at the

initiative of three young artists laid the foundation for our collection of Impressionist art. Only this spring, we welcomed Pissarro's *La Maison Rondest, l'Hermitage, Pontoise* (1875), gifted to the Kunstmuseum Basel by a Swiss private collection.

Pissarro's artistic stance is more complex than those of his friends. His approach differs markedly from the themes with which Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, and others won the favor of contemporary audiences. For example, Pissarro was the only Impressionist for whom rendering the modest lives especially of the rural populace was a central interest. Rather than depicting the world of the well-to-do bourgeoisie, he concerned himself with the landscape cultivated by humans and the experiences of peasants and agricultural laborers.

### **Politics, society, and the art market**

Pissarro—very much unlike Monet or Renoir—was averse to any kind of aestheticization. That is presumably why the painter never achieved commercial success and found himself in financial difficulties throughout his life. Pissarro took a leading role in setting up a self-organized cooperative through which artists would exhibit and sell their own work: The *Société anonyme des artistes peintres, sculpteurs et graveurs* would make art history under the name Impressionists.

In the 1880s, Impressionism, whose merits had long been sharply contested, garnered growing public acclaim; private and public collections began to acquire works, allowing their creators to make a living. At this very moment, Pissarro aligned himself with a further revolution in painting, Neo-Impressionism, giving fresh proof of his tenacious pursuit of artistic progress. The radical aesthetics and scientific method of Neo-Impressionism, espoused by Paul Signac, Georges Seurat, Louis Hayet, and Pissarro's oldest son Lucien, struck him as a logical progression from Impressionism. In the 1890s, he returned to the Impressionist style with its looser brushwork, yet he remained faithful to his conviction that good art was revolutionary at its core and championed an imperturbable faith in modernity.

The painter made no secret of his interest in the writings of anarchism and his support for efforts to disseminate them. Like many of his contemporaries, especially among the Neo-Impressionists, Pissarro was persuaded that the unequal distribution of resources, especially in metropolitan centers like Paris or London, would sooner or later precipitate an overthrow of the existing social order. Unlike some of those who shared his politics, however, Pissarro believed in a peaceful and nonviolent revolution.

The extent to which his art reflects his political convictions has long occupied art historians informed by social history. He did not wish his pictures to be read as

visualizations of a political program. Still, core ideas of anarchism resonate in Pissarro's revolutionary technique, his quest for autonomy and liberty in any situation in life, and his determination to break fresh ground against all resistance.

### **An irrepressible experimentalist**

Pissarro's life was shaped by the events and historical dynamics of the nineteenth century. He embodied some of the most complex conflicts of his time and thought that artists were called upon to articulate critical reflections both on the prevailing ideas and on political, social, and economic realities. His probing engagement with these conditions led him to create works that speak directly to urgent concerns of today.

His background made Pissarro an outsider among the French artists with whom he socialized throughout his life. Born in 1830 to Jewish parents on the island of St. Thomas in the Caribbean, then a Danish colony, he was the only Impressionist to have been raised on two continents. He spoke three languages (French, English, and Spanish) and was conversant with ethnic and cultural diversity from childhood on. His identity, his perspective on painting, and his worldview were informed both by his itinerant early life and by his exchanges of ideas with other painters.

Pissarro's extraordinary curiosity led him to embrace creative experimentation and novel forms of representation. Drawing inspiration from a milieu that included artists like Camille Corot and Gustave Courbet, he strove to strike up collaborative relationships with others who would join him in developing an artistic vision independent of the Academy.

### **A gift for friendship**

More than any other member of his circle, Pissarro had an intuitive grasp of his painter friends' feelings and ideas, nurturing their potential and learning from them in turn. One might even say that his capacity for friendship was a unique "gift." Its basis was his respect for the artistic individuality of each one of his colleagues and his belief in the equality of different positions. Pissarro was distrustful of constraining hierarchies and averse to any dogma. Artistic collaboration, to him, had nothing to do with seniority; as he saw it, the free exchange of ideas among equals was its foundation. The exhibition illustrates different interconnections between the protagonists of the period, limning an alternative to the model of the artist as a genius working in isolation from the outside world.

## **First-rate loans**

The exhibition *Camille Pissarro. The Studio of Modernism* unites some 180 works from collections in Switzerland and abroad, including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; the British Museum, London; the Dallas Museum of Art; the Kunsthalle Mannheim; Kunstmuseum Bern; Kunst Museum Winterthur; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva; Musées de Pontoise; Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; Museum Folkwang, Essen; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; the National Gallery, London; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; and Tate Modern, London.

## **Catalogue**

The extensive catalogue accompanying the exhibition, with contributions by Timothy J. Clark, André Dombrowski, Claire Durand-Ruel Snoellaerts, Christophe Duvivier, Sophie Eichner, Colin Harrison, Josef Helfenstein, Jelle Imkampe, David Misteli, Olga Osadtschy, Joachim Pissarro with Alma Egger, Esther Rapoport, Valérie Sueur-Hermel, and Kerstin Thomas will be released by Prestel Verlag.

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## **Imagery and information on the exhibition**

[www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/medien](http://www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/medien)

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## Biographical sketch

Camille Pissarro is born in 1830 to Jewish parents on St. Thomas, one of the Antillean islands, which is then under Danish rule. In 1855, he settles in Paris, where he works in the orbit of the pre-Impressionists and the School of Barbizon. He refuses to join his father's business and defies his parents' wishes that he pursue an academic education, preferring the liberal atmosphere of a free atelier called Académie Suisse, where he makes the acquaintance of his future colleagues and friends Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, and Armand Guillaumin. In 1861, he meets Julie Vellay, a maid in his parents' household. Over his parents' objections, they begin a relationship that will last until his death; she will bear him eight children.

During the years before the Franco-Prussian of 1870, Pissarro puts his stamp on the evolving Impressionist aesthetic. The Impressionist circle owes him its characteristic independent form of organization. From 1872 until 1886, he unifies the revolutionary movement, being the only artist to contribute to all eight exhibitions mounted by the group. In 1886, Pissarro becomes the animating spirit behind the group's renewal and dissolution, helping a new generation take the lead: the Neo-Impressionists.

The price Pissarro pays for his lifelong willingness to explore fresh creative avenues is that financial security eludes him; he never achieves the commercial success that Claude Monet, for one, enjoys from the mid-1880s onward. Meanwhile, he faces the need to feed a growing family, and so money remains a constant worry until the end of his life.

Camille Pissarro spends his late years in Éragny, a small town in the Normandy, where the family has lived since 1884. It is his point of departure for regular trips during which he produces a number of late Impressionist series of cityscapes and harbor views. In 1903, he dies suddenly due to an inflammation.

Pissarro's works are now in the world's leading art collections. In the past two decades, major exhibitions have been shown at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (2013), the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco and the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, Mass. (2011/2012), and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2005).