

CAMILLE PISSARRO BETWEEN IMPRESSIONISM AND REALISM:
THE TEMPORALITIES OF WORK AND REST

By

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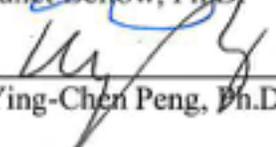
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ABSTRACT

Camille Pissarro has long been associated with the Impressionist movement. However, while his paintings of the 1870s and early 1880s employed the “sketchy” brushwork that typified Impressionism, he by and large did not choose to represent subjects drawn from modern, urban life, as did his Impressionist peers. Instead, while living in the small town of Pontoise, Pissarro repeatedly depicted rural agricultural laborers, an un-modern, or even anti-modern subject. These images of peasants typify the Realist school of painting, which originated around mid-century but continued to depict rural subjects through the 1870s and 80 and thus coexisted with Impressionism. As Marnin Young has shown, Realist painters of this later generation often chose motifs that exemplified the “slow time” associated with life in the countryside. I argue that Pissarro’s paintings of agricultural workers combine Impressionist instantaneity and ephemerality with Realist subjects that connote the “slow time” of rural France. In so doing, I complicate our understanding of Pissarro’s relationship to the Impressionist movement.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 RECONSIDERING PISSARRO	6
CHAPTER 2 REALISM AND THE PLACE OF PONTOISE	15
CHAPTER 3 THE WORK OF PAINTING	33
CONCLUSION.....	44
APPENDIX A CAMILLE PISSARRO’S EARLY LIFE, EDUCATION, AND COLLABORATION WITH THE IMPRESSIONISTS.....	46
ILLUSTRATIONS	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	53

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Camille Pissarro, <i>Portrait of a Peasant Woman</i> (1880). Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.....	51
Figure 2: Edouard Manet, <i>The Railway</i> (1873). Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.....	51
Figure 3: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, <i>La Grenouillère</i> (1869). Oil on canvas. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.....	51
Figure 4: Claude Monet, <i>The Gare St.Lazare</i> (1877). Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, London.....	51
Figure 5: Jean-François Millet, <i>The Gleaners</i> (1857). Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.....	51
Figure 6: Gustave Courbet, <i>The Wheat Sifters</i> (1854). Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes.....	51
Figure 7: Jean-François Millet, <i>The Angelus</i> (1855-1857). Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.....	51
Figure 8: Jules Breton, <i>The Song of the Lark</i> , (1884). Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago.....	51
Figure 9: Jules Bastien-Lepage, <i>Haymaking (Les Foins)</i> (1877). Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.....	51
Figure 10: Jules Bastien-Lepage, <i>Summer Landscape (Paysage pour Les Foins)</i> (1876). Oil on canvas. Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris.....	51
Figure 11: Camille Pissarro, <i>Washerwoman</i> (1880). Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.....	51
Figure 12: Camille Pissarro, <i>Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat</i> (1881). Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.....	51
Figure 13: Théodore Muller, <i>Design for an Urban Project in Pontoise</i> (1864). Lithograph. Musée Pissarro, Pontoise.....	51
Figure 14: Camille Pissarro, <i>Factories near Pontoise</i> (1873). Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts.....	51
Figure 15: Camille Pissarro, <i>The Oise near Pontoise</i> (1873). Oil on canvas. Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.....	51

Figure 16: Claude Monet, <i>Le Pont de chemin de fer à Argenteuil</i> (1873). Oil on canvas. Private Collection.....	52
Figure 17: Camille Pissarro, <i>l'Hermitage at Pontoise</i> (1867). Oil on canvas. Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, Germany.....	52
Figure 18: Camille Pissarro, <i>Woman Herding a Cow</i> , (1874). Oil on canvas. Private Collection.....	52
Figure 19: Camille Pissarro, <i>Vegetable Garden at l'Hermitage, Pontoise</i> (1879). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.....	52
Figure 20: Camille Pissarro, <i>Woman and Child at the Well</i> (1882). Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.....	52
Figure 21: Camille Pissarro, <i>The Shepherdess</i> (1881). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.....	52
Figure 22: Camille Pissarro, <i>Young Female Peasant Leaning against a Tree</i> (1884). Chalk and watercolor on paper. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.....	52
Figure 23: Camille Pissarro, <i>Young Woman Standing, Holding a Stick in Her Hands</i> (1885). Pastel over charcoal sketch on cream laid paper. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.....	52
Figure 24: Gustave Caillebotte, <i>The Floor Scrapers</i> (1875). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.....	52
Figure 25: Edgar Degas, <i>Women Ironing</i> (1884-86). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.....	52

INTRODUCTION

In 1880, while living in the town of Pontoise thirty kilometers outside of Paris, Camille Pissarro painted the work now known as *Peasant Woman* (fig. 1). Never exhibited publicly during Pissarro's lifetime, it is one of nearly 300 works by the artist painted in the years 1872-1882 that depict the agricultural laborers of Pontoise.¹ The woman in this painting seems to be an outdoor worker; the kerchief she wears would protect her head from the sun and keep her hair out of her face, and the blue apron around her waist would keep dirt off the clothing underneath. Even her hand, which Pissarro painted several shades darker than her face, subtly points to her occupation. However, Pissarro provides no further clues about the nature of her labor. The background is a nondescript outdoor space, filled with indistinct greenery. The composition is cropped so that her right hand and legs are not visible, making it difficult to discern what she is doing. What we can see of her body suggests that she is pausing in a moment of rest. She places one hand on her waist, which gives her pose an appearance of stillness, but the sway of her hips makes it appear that she has just stopped moving or is about to initiate movement. The facture of Pissarro's flickering brushstrokes, and the patches of canvas visible between paint strokes in the background, create a blurriness that adds to this sense of movement. At the same time, Pissarro built-up layers of paint on the figure's clothes and face, creating an almost sculptural, weighty quality to her body.

The style of this painting is emphatically Impressionist. Impressionist artists concerned themselves with representing an instantaneous moment, using "sketchy" brush strokes to elicit a sense of rapidity and spontaneity. The physical act of creating this momentary "represented time" was also often done quickly, or meant to appear that way; many of the Impressionists

¹ Christopher Lloyd, "Camille Pissarro and the Essence of Place" in *Pissarro: Creating the Impressionist Landscape*, ed. by Katherine Rothkopf (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2007), 34.

famously painted *en plein air*, or outdoors, in order to quickly capture their observations of a given motif. Pissarro was a committed member of the Impressionist circle: he was the only Impressionist painter to exhibit in all eight of the group's exhibitions. However, as James Rubin has pointed out, while some of the other Impressionists painted figural images, Pissarro was unique amongst the Impressionist in his commitment to representations of rural laborers.² Accordingly, while *Peasant Woman* is stylistically Impressionist, the subject is not part of the urban iconography usually associated with the movement. Pissarro's paintings of agricultural laborers, including *Peasant Woman*, offer an alternative to the themes of modernity to which many of his Impressionist colleagues working in Paris and its surrounding suburbs dedicated themselves (fig. 2).

Pissarro's interest in rural agricultural laborers is more consistent with the Realist school of painting. Marnin Young discusses the persistence of Realist tendencies in art during the 1870s and 80s, long after the movement's supposed heyday at mid-century.³ As Young notes, Realist paintings often depicted life in the French countryside, choosing motifs that connoted "slow time" or enduring temporality—such as agricultural laborers, whose work was repetitive and time-consuming, followed the seasons, and often employed traditional methods. Likewise, Young argues, Realist paintings were intended to be viewed at length. This signified that in the full detailed rendering of these so-called "slow" subjects, "the time of looking was meant to approach the time of the representation."⁴ Ultimately, he claims, "Realism in its final phase

² James Rubin, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 184.

³ Marnin Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism: Painting and the Politics of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁴ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 9.

faltered and came to a close...because artists found it all but impossible to reconcile a manner of painting designed to be viewed carefully, continuously, and slowly with a newer, faster iconography of modern life.”⁵ Young acknowledges that Pissarro’s engagement with rural subjects, particularly the female peasant at rest, indicates that his painting was in dialogue with Realism—a relationship that has yet to be analyzed in any detail.

Additionally, Young argues that the art of the 1870s and 80s was characterized by a type of “temporal bilingualism” that both stemmed from and reflected social and economic changes in France at that time. Modernity did not happen all at once, but coexisted with traditional modes of living. The idea that two contradictory modes of time—old and new—could be experienced simultaneously was fundamental during the second half of the nineteenth-century in France. Young claims that the instantaneity and modernity of Impressionism can only be fully understood in juxtaposition to the enduring and slow-moving time of rural life. He suggests that the Impressionist aim to achieve an ephemeral, or rapid, mode of painting was an outcome of this changed understanding of time, where life had become more fast-paced and systematized.⁶ However, whereas the Impressionists developed a mode of painting to suit modern life, the Realists resisted modern temporality, embracing both scenes and styles associated with enduring time.

Why would Pissarro apply a style that connotes modernity and speed to a subject that seems relatively or comparatively “slow”? This thesis considers the ways in which Pissarro’s paintings made in Pontoise, especially *Peasant Woman*, mobilize different experiences and concepts of time—encompassing both motion and stillness, the fleeting and the enduring. A

⁵ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 10.

⁶ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 8.

significant number of Pissarro's so-called "portraits" of female agricultural laborers from his period in Pontoise depict women workers in various states of rest, either alone or with a few other figures.⁷ However, the female figure in *Peasant Woman* is neither explicitly resting nor working; as it is thus an exception in this group, it affords an opportunity to explore the complexity of Pissarro's approach to the theme of time. More than any of Pissarro's other works, it evinces the "temporal bilingualism" present in late-nineteenth century France in its attempt to reconcile a Realist "slow" subject with Impressionist "fast" technique.

The first chapter of my thesis reviews the scholarship on Pissarro, and provides essential background information about his life, his politics, and his involvement in the Impressionist group. Scholars of Pissarro either concentrate on his involvement with the Impressionist group—and downplay how his work differs from other members of that group—or isolate the artist, focusing solely on his biography. More specifically, previous scholarship on the artist has not analyzed how Pissarro's images of rural agricultural work fit into the framework of Impressionism, which is conventionally defined as the "painting of modern life."⁸ This chapter lays the groundwork for a new understanding of Pissarro's relationship with both Impressionism and the Realist painters working at that time.

The second chapter delves into the subject of rural work and its centrality to Realist painting. Pictures of peasants had been a staple of Realism dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, when artists such as Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet became famous for their depictions of peasant women at work in the countryside. Such Realist preoccupations persisted during the 1870s and early 1880s in the work of artists such as Jules Breton and Jules Bastien-

⁷ In Chapter Three I will address the issue of the titles of Pissarro's portrait-like paintings.

⁸ Clark, T.J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Lepage. I relate Pissarro's time in Pontoise to this ongoing interest in Realist painting. Since Pontoise was located well outside Paris but still accessible by train, it arguably exemplified the "temporal bilingualism" of this historical moment. Many of the rural laborers in Pontoise maintained many of the pre-modern modes of agricultural work associated with repetitive and time-consuming tasks, although, as I shall demonstrate in this chapter, there were signs of industrialization in the surrounding landscape that Pissarro largely chose to ignore or to excise from his painting. Nevertheless, the real juxtaposition of rural and industrial settings and tasks in Pontoise might suggest a specific context that inspired Pissarro to apply modern (Impressionist) technique to rural (Realist) subjects in order to achieve particular expressive effects.

Finally, the third chapter will analyze Pissarro's approach to Impressionist technique, with an emphasis on the issue of time in his artistic process. In the 1880s, Pissarro was working in his studio, producing studies and drawings before starting on his canvases, thus spending a significant amount of time on each painting. In other words, although Pissarro's works appear to be made spontaneously *en plein air*, in actuality the paintings took a great deal of time to produce. This chapter will relate this studio practice to Pissarro's choice to depict agricultural workers, noting parallels between the subject's repetitive, time consuming labor and the artist's own painting process. This might suggest Pissarro viewed himself in equivalent terms as a worker, notwithstanding the significantly different nature of his labor. I will conclude the chapter by assessing the complex implications of Pissarro's attempts to reconcile Realist subject matter and Impressionist technique in his painting of *Peasant Woman*.

CHAPTER 1

RECONSIDERING PISSARRO

This chapter reviews the scholarly literature on Camille Pissarro, identifying two strands of discourse or approaches to his career. One strand places the artist within the Impressionist group without acknowledging how distinct his iconography is; the second, which concentrates on his biography considers him in isolation from his artistic peers. My aim in this thesis is to bridge the gap between the two strands I identify in this chapter, acknowledging the distinctiveness of his subjects while still relating his work to Impressionism. The subjects that Pissarro depicted did not always align with the typical Impressionist motifs that are associated with the movement. I will argue that we must reconsider how Pissarro's peasant paintings fit into the narrative of late-nineteenth-century French painting, characterizing them as both Impressionist and Realist.

During the 1870s and early 1880s, Pissarro consciously affiliated himself with the Impressionists, exhibiting consistently in their annual group shows. But if we look at his work side by side with other Impressionist artists, like Pierre-Auguste Renoir or Claude Monet, we see that the latter were more interested in subjects of bourgeois leisure (fig. 3) and urban modernity (fig. 4), whereas Pissarro consciously chose to focus on relatively traditional, rural themes. This raises the question of the relationship between the innovative painting technique associated with Impressionism and the scenes of modern life for which they are often celebrated.⁹ As this chapter will establish, Pissarro was, stylistically, very much a part of the tradition of Impressionism; at the same time, his iconography was strongly influenced by Realism. While Pissarro did not wholly exclude modernity from all of his canvases, it is significant that he made the conscious decision to omit such elements from most of his paintings. The agricultural laborer—who was

⁹ Anthea Callen, *Techniques of the Impressionists* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Chartwell Books, 1982), 22.

perceived to be unmodern—was the central focus of his career in Pontoise, an issue to which I shall return to in my next chapter.

The Established Narrative

In examining the career and works of Pissarro, scholars have tended to concentrate on his membership within the Impressionist group, and his role as mentor to younger artists of the following, Neo-Impressionist generation. The most attention has been given to Pissarro's landscape paintings of the French countryside, made during the 1870s and early 1880s; his significant (albeit brief) participation in the Neo-Impressionist movement of the mid- to late 1880s; and his cityscapes from his later career.¹⁰ His landscapes, both rural and urban, tend to be discussed at the expense of his images of single figures or figural groups, which he produced while living in small towns outside of Paris starting in the late 1870s. Several of these paintings depict one or two persons, mostly members of the rural, working class, either engaged in a task or at rest. His interest in the routine of daily life of average people living outside urban centers is significant in that, as I have established, it differs from the types of subjects his peers were painting at the same moment. Pissarro's relationship to Impressionist painting method, and his application of that method to rural subjects, therefore needs to be reassessed.

T.J. Clark has written extensively on the later part of Pissarro's career, specifically his involvement with Neo-Impressionism. He specifically focuses on the artist's paintings of peasants and attempts to contextualize the socio-political of these works in the 1890s. Clark

¹⁰ Christoph Becker, "Camille Pissarro, Impressionist Artist," in *Camille Pissarro*, ed. By Fiona Elliott (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1999), 49-56. Significantly, most of Pissarro's paintings and drawings from the beginning of his career were destroyed during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Pissarro moved his family to London when it appeared that the Prussian army would gain control of the land surrounding Paris. He left his works at his house in Louveciennes that was later occupied and used by Prussian troops.

makes reference to Pissarro's earlier work from Pontoise in the 1870s but does not address the period of the early 1880s when Pissarro began to focus on figural representations of rural work.¹¹ By 1885, Pissarro had become involved with the Neo-Impressionist group of painters and started experimenting with new application processes of paint and color. This thesis is focused on examining the part of Pissarro's career when he was still associated with Impressionism but in clear dialogue with Realism. Clark's analysis of Pissarro's peasant paintings critically explores the political and economic environment. However, Clark's investigation falls short in specifically addressing the introduction of the motif of the rural female laborer in Pissarro's oeuvre.

Clark has also discussed at length the implications of rest and leisure in Pissarro's paintings. He argues that shade is a mark of the pastoral and that Pissarro valued a mode of living that was (in appearance at least) in opposition to modernity. To underscore his point, Clark writes "pastoral is a dream of time—of leisure sewn into exertion, snatched from it easily, threaded through the rhythms of labor and insinuating other tempos and imperatives into the working day."¹² According to him, Pissarro's images are as close to a authentic depiction of a past way of life during this modern period. The artist specifically appreciated this reality of living, as demonstrated in his paintings—in spite of them being constructed pictures. Pissarro was not concerned with just depicting the prevalent temporality of work but also its absence.

Though scholars generally associate Pissarro with Impressionism, for reasons that should be clear, many have had a difficult time placing his work within the Impressionist narrative. Not only do Pissarro's strongly leftist political beliefs make him stand apart from many of his more

¹¹ TJ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 55.

¹² TJ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 70.

moderate colleagues, but the fact that he spent much of his time outside of the epicenter of Paris makes him seem marginal to the Impressionist mainstream. However, as stated previously, he was extremely dedicated to showing at the Impressionist exhibitions and maintained close friendships with a number of people from the group. Richard Thomson has suggested that the recent scholarship on nineteenth-century art has attempted to redefine Impressionism in terms of technique and purpose, and thus advocates for a repositioning of Pissarro within this new narrative of the movement.¹³ My aim in this thesis is to contribute to such a repositioning of his work by reconsidering his relations to both the Impressionists and the Realists.

The Biographical Approach

By and large, the scholarship on Pissarro is grounded in biography, with subsidiary use of formal analysis and social art history to relate his paintings to his life. Using a biographical approach can be beneficial in gaining knowledge about where Pissarro was painting, who he was working with and what factors in his life motivated him to paint the subjects he did. What is lost by emphasizing biographical information to analyze Pissarro's paintings is an understanding of Pissarro's painting process and a critical analysis of Pissarro as a worker. His biography alone does not reveal the differences in subjects between Pissarro and his peers. Both formal and socio-political analyses help to contextualize Pissarro and his paintings during the period of late-nineteenth century France.

One of the foremost scholars on Camille Pissarro is Joachim Pissarro, the artist's great-grandson; he has written extensively on Pissarro's life, his religious upbringing, and family

¹³ Richard Thomson, *Camille Pissarro: Impressionism, Landscape and Rural Labor* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1990), 8.

relationships, often relying on family records that he has brought to public light.¹⁴ Since he is a relative of the artist, Joachim Pissarro tends to be sympathetic towards Pissarro and therefore, his assessments must be viewed with the understanding of some familial bias. Broadly speaking, Joachim Pissarro argues that Pissarro's involvement in Impressionism and developing the new technique, reflected his political ideology to break with the bourgeois hierarchy of the Paris Salon in favor of this new group of artists collectively working together.¹⁵ This type of group effort to make and display art would have exemplified Pissarro's desired social ideal, in which laborers worked together and depended on each other, rather than relying on a larger government-controlled structure.¹⁶ Impressionist artists themselves wanted to do away with hierarchies in painting, but Pissarro was more radical than most of the other members of the group in his denunciation of bourgeois values. Joachim Pissarro insists that Pissarro's early experiences would have led to him disapproving of his family's bourgeois status and aligning himself with more marginalized people.¹⁷

Another major Pissarro scholar, Richard Brettell, uses both Pissarro's biography and

¹⁴ Letters are an important part of Pissarro's later life, specifically in his correspondence with his eldest son Lucien. From those letters, Pissarro talks a lot about his family as well as his painting career and exhibitions. These letters have been printed in multiple publications.

¹⁵ Joachim Pissarro, "Pissarro's Memory" in *Camille Pissarro: Impressionist Innovator* ed. by Vivianne Barsky, Lois Bar-yaacov and Judy Levy. Jerusalem (Israel: The Israel Museum, 1995), 27.

¹⁶ Joachim Pissarro, *Pioneering Modern Painting: Cézanne and Pissarro 1865-1885* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 42.

¹⁷ Pissarro, "Pissarro's Memory," 22; although Pissarro grew up in a bourgeois household, his family was isolated from the Jewish community on the island. This isolation forced Pissarro's parents to send their children to a Protestant school. Slavery still existed in the Danish West Indies at the time and many children of black slaves were also sent to the same school as the Pissarro children run by the Moravian Church on the island. It is likely that Pissarro and his brothers were the only white students amongst their classmates. It was also at this school is where Pissarro apparently was exposed to lessons in both drawing and painting.

formal analysis in discussing the artist's career. Brettell has studied in particular Pissarro's paintings of peasant workers, arguing that by painting these figures, the artist demonstrated that they were figures worthy of representation in art. He also states that Pissarro's images of laborers in the landscapes they worked exemplified Pissarro's political ideals of social equality and cooperative work.¹⁸ In his comprehensive book, *Pissarro's People*, Brettell explores in detail the artist's personal relationships and living conditions throughout his career.¹⁹ Brettell uses historical documentation and other biographical information about Pissarro to examine the many portrait-like paintings of rural workers that Pissarro made while living in Pontoise; he argues that these "portraits" of peasants confront the bourgeois tradition of portraiture by positioning rural, working class people in such a manner that places them on the same level as the wealthy elite.²⁰ Pissarro's choice of subject, according to Brettell, is thus politically motivated, as is the artist's belief in collective work, which he sees reflected in Pissarro's involvement with the Impressionist group.

Additionally, Richard Shiff's evaluation of Pissarro identifies him as a worker. In his essays, "The Restless Worker," Shiff compares Pissarro with his predecessor Jean-François Millet, both of whom portrayed peasants working in French landscapes.²¹ Shiff also emphasizes that the artist was deeply influenced by his collaboration with a number of contemporary artists, including Paul Cézanne and Georges Seurat. In his analysis of Pissarro's painting process, Shiff

¹⁸ Richard Brettell, "Pissarro and Anarchism: Can Art Be Anarchist?" in *Pissarro*, ed. by Guillermo Solana (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2013), 56.

¹⁹ Richard Brettell, *Pissarro's People* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 2011).

²⁰ Brettell, "Pissarro and Anarchism," 61.

²¹ Richard Shiff, "The Restless Worker" in *Camille Pissarro*, ed. by Terrance Maloon (Australia: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005), 40-41.

has equated Pissarro's laborious painting method to the field work his agricultural laborers perform. Shiff writes that the "peasant stood as a paradigmatic of Pissarro's concerns: the life of workers, the dignity and moral reward of work...whether by contact with the soil of the fields or by engagement with paint and canvas in the studio."²² Shiff's extensive examination of Pissarro's painting technique reveals that the artist was at least interested in the possible connection between the labor of painting and field work. To support his argument, Shiff uses a socio-historical approach in discussing Pissarro's political beliefs, which emphasized "beneficial working conditions, leisure time and the greatest opportunity for aesthetic development in the individual."²³ Pissarro's working method and its association with field labor will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Pissarro's Move to France

Camille Pissarro's extensive career spanned almost half a century and he worked in vastly different places from the Danish West Indies and Venezuela to England and France. Scholars have argued that Pissarro was influenced early in his career by the landscape and people from his birth place of Saint Thomas and that there were events in his childhood that may have had an effect on his affinity to paint marginalized people and workers.²⁴ The third of four sons, Pissarro was born as Jacob Pissarro, on July 10, 1830 in the Danish West Indies.²⁵ Pissarro spent

²² Richard Shiff, "Pissarro: Dirty Painter," in *Camille Pissarro: Impressions of City and Country*, edited by Karen Levitov and Richard Shiff. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2007), 15.

²³ Shiff, "The Restless Worker," 30.

²⁴ Karen Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," in *Camille Pissarro: Impressions of City and Country*, ed. by Karen Levitov and Richard Shiff (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2007), 2.

²⁵ Kathleen Adler, *A Time and a Place: 'Near Sydenham Hill' by Camille Pissarro* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 2011), 5.

the first twelve years of his life on the island, with no exposure to large, urban cities. In 1842, Pissarro's parents sent him to boarding school in Paris where he received his primary training in drawing and painting, as well as a more formal education.²⁶ Pissarro moved to France permanently in October, 1855 in order to pursue a career in painting.²⁷ He quickly became in contact with French landscape painter Camille Corot who was associated with the group of painters working near the Forest of Fontainebleau. Pissarro had enrolled at the *École des Beaux Arts*, for private classes and informal instruction by Corot himself.²⁸ Many of Pissarro's early landscapes reveal the stylistic influences of Corot's paintings of the French countryside.

By 1860, Pissarro had met and become acquaintances with Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne at the *Académie Suisse*.²⁹ At this time, Pissarro had already established relationships with a number of artists that were at that moment experimenting with new painting techniques. Edouard Manet's novel approach to painting scenes of modern life would set the ground work for a group of artists who would continue to push the boundaries of the established institutions. Pissarro was deeply committed to this group of artists and acted as mentor to many of the younger painters of the proceeding generation in the decades that followed.³⁰

²⁶ Adler, *A Time and a Place*, 10; the school was run by M. Wilfred Savary in Passy. When Pissarro moved back to France in 1855, he first lived again in Passy, where most of his family, including his mother Rachel, were already living.

²⁷ Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," 3; during the first few years after Pissarro moved back to France, he continued painting Caribbean scenes and subjects, which he initially became interested while living in Saint Thomas. Many of the figures are Caribbeans of African descent, demonstrating his early commitment to non-bourgeois people and manual labor. This arguably influenced his later attachment to the working class and rural laborers in France.

²⁸ Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," 2.

²⁹ Becker, "Camille Pissarro, Impressionist Artist," 39.

³⁰ Brettell, *Pissarro's People*, 88; Pissarro met the person with whom he would develop one of the most important relationships in his life in the early 1860's. Julie Velley was an assistant cook in Pissarro's mother's home. Julie came from a modest, working-class background of land-owning peasantry

Pissarro was also deeply influenced by his collaboration with a number of contemporary artists including Monet, Paul Cézanne, and George Seurat. The supportive artistic relationship and personal friendship between Pissarro and Cézanne in particular was one of the most important working relationships for Pissarro. The two artists each had their own individual style, but worked very closely with one another and often painted the same scene simultaneously during the early 1870s. Pissarro was demonstrating that he was open to new ideas and even sought out inspiration from other artists who held similar beliefs.³¹

Pissarro's involvement with the group of Impressionist artists is extremely significant because of the role that collectivity and collaboration played throughout Pissarro's career. The cooperative work ideal put forth by the Impressionist exhibitions is something that Pissarro may have considered beneficial to the creation of art. It allowed some amount of freedom for the individual painter while also providing an environment where artists could feel a type of shared creative endeavor. Scholars have made it apparent that Pissarro's anarchist leanings would have lead him to support this type of collective work.³² He was both an outlier and committed to the Impressionists.³³

and grew up in a small village. Pissarro and Julie began a relationship and in 1863, Julie gave birth to the couple's eldest son Lucien. The Pissarros would go on to have six more children. Due to Julie's rural upbringing, she was well adept at keeping a full kitchen garden and some livestock in order to feed her family. Julie was the practical and self-sustaining model of rural life that Pissarro so much idealized to be the standard in modern society.

³¹ Pissarro, *Pioneering Modern Painting*, 42.

³² Brettell, "Pissarro and Anarchism," 56.

³³ A longer discussion of Pissarro's family, anarchist beginnings as well as his artistic training and influences, can be found in Appendix A.

CHAPTER 2
REALISM AND THE PLACE
OF PONTOISE

In Camille Pissarro's lifetime, viewers observed parallels between his work and that of Realist painters. Throughout his career, Pissarro was often compared—to his chagrin—with Jean-François Millet, specifically because both artists frequently depicted scenes of rural life. Contemporary viewers also remarked that Pissarro's paintings possessed many of the same qualities that characterized Realist pictures. For example, the critic Charles Morice wrote in 1905 of Pissarro's work: "I've noticed that Pissarro's paintings, the human figures, quite precisely, have the same import as the vegetables beside them."³⁴ Realist artists of the mid-century were known for treating every part of their compositions in the same manner and did not privilege figures over objects.

Pissarro would have been familiar with the iconography of both Millet and Gustave Courbet's paintings, and he adopted many of these same motifs, especially that of female agricultural workers. More scholars have occasionally cited these connections to Millet, they have not linked Pissarro to the Realist practices of his contemporaries. This chapter places Pissarro's paintings of agricultural workers in the context of Realist practice during the 1870s and 80s, comparing him with other artists working on similar subjects, such as Jules Bastien-Lepage. Pissarro was no doubt aware of Bastien-Lepage and his work. According to Ward, Pissarro was responding to the elements in Bastien-Lepage's painting that correspond to the traditions of Realism established by Millet. In a similar manner to Pissarro, contemporary critics

³⁴ Shiff, "Pissarro: Dirty Painter," 18.

also compared Bastien-Lepage to Millet.³⁵ Pissarro was in clear dialogue, as Young has suggested, with Realist painters that the relationship between the two needs to be further analyzed.³⁶ Pissarro's determination to paint the peasant woman thus must be understood in the dynamic and agnostic context of artistic competition as well, a fact that should make his images of agricultural laborers should be more predominately positioned within his own œuvre and in scholarship writ large.

This chapter will highlight Pissarro's relation to Realism by discussing the significance of Pontoise to his work of that period. Christopher Lloyd characterizes Pontoise as "the place with which Pissarro is most closely associated and the one that he examined the most intensely during his life."³⁷ Other scholars have observed the importance of location for Pissarro's artistic output during this period of his career. As Ward notes:

Probably more than anyone else in his circle of painters, Pissarro was conscious of the discrepancies in the French landscape, the experiences of going from one place to another in a world unevenly developed, economically, culturally, aesthetically... This awareness of discontinuities must be measure not only through the iconography of social history or psychology and ideology but also in terms of something like aesthetics, very broadly conceived as ways of seeing and sensing though making³⁸

In addition, this chapter will analyze a number of works that Pissarro made during the early 1880s, and examine how time plays an essential role in his images from that period during his career. In these paintings, Pissarro demonstrated his interest in local traditions of agricultural

³⁵ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 39.

³⁶ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 16.

³⁷ Lloyd, "Camille Pissarro and the Essence of Place," 34.

³⁸ Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 31.

life and labor. Pontoise is an important setting in that respect; although there were signs of modernity encroaching into the French countryside, it had not yet overtaken the small town. Pissarro's images suggest an interest in capturing an enduring way of life during in the face of its threatened obsolescence due to the urbanization tied to the Industrial Revolution. Finally, with an analysis of a number of works Pissarro painted during the early 1880s, it is proposed that concepts of time played an integral role in relation to the themes of rural agricultural labor in those works.

Realist Painting and the Subject of Rural Work

The prevailing view of the Parisian elite during the nineteenth-century held that peasants were a part of the natural landscape; inherently and harmoniously connected to nature, they were understood as an unchanging component of it. The perceived relative permanence of rural agricultural life was promoted in terms of its contrast with the radical societal and infrastructure change brought by modernization. This idealized image of the peasant was implicitly contrasted with the increasing urbanization of French cities, especially Paris. In reality, however, this binary construction of rural versus urban, and the claims detaching peasants from the city, were inaccurate. In fact, the agricultural worker was directly associated with the industrial structure of the French economic system, since such laborers provided crucial infrastructure support to urban centers with the food they produced.³⁹ Moreover, this ideological the isolation of the peasant laborer also was likely perpetuated as a form of political suppression and a means of controlling the agricultural work force.⁴⁰

³⁹ Maureen Ryan, "The Peasant's Bond to Gual, God, Land and Nature: The Myth of the Rural and Jules Breton's 'Le Chant De L'aouette,'" *Canadian Art Review* 19, no. 1/2 (1992), 87.

⁴⁰ Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 80.

At the same time, rural laborers were often seen as politically threatening to the capital; the political unrest of the late 1840s and early 1850s led to many Parisians being fearful of the potential power of peasant workforce living in the regional areas of France.⁴¹ It has therefore been argued that representations of peasants by Realist painters in fact attempted to diffuse their power. The peasant woman in particular often was represented as a part of country life carefully separated from the city. Rural female workers exemplified the cultural ideals of both feminine character and the good worker who could be controlled. As Linda Nochlin has argued, in such representations “like her male counterpart, virtually embodied the positive image of the rural working class in the middle of the nineteenth century...The assimilation of the peasant-woman to the natural order helped to rationalize rural poverty and the necessity for grinding, continuous labor.”⁴² The argument that agricultural laborers functioned predominately in visual images as a way to demonstrate their alleged natural passivity and empower the bourgeois elite in the urban city is persuasive. This strategy would have effectively neutralized elite anxieties regarding a very real threat to the social and political order. However, some paintings explicitly acknowledged the perceived danger embodied by the peasant class; subversive content in the context of the revolution was famously perceived in *The Gleaners* (fig. 5), for instance, though this context was less relevant by the early 1880s.

As discussed, pictures of peasants were a staple of Realism dating back to the mid-nineteenth-century. These paintings depicted lower-class workers, especially peasant women, engaged in various forms of agricultural labor and situated in distinctly French landscapes. The first generation of Realist artists, including Millet and Courbet, became notorious for painting

⁴¹ T.J Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 87.

⁴² Nochlin, *Representing Women*, 84-85.

peasant women in the midst of strenuous and monotonous tasks, emphasizing the physical toll field labor took on their bodies. As Marnin Young has argued, such repetitive forms of field labor exemplified a concept of “old time,” which was cyclical and determined by nature; this work was dependent on the season as well as the time of day. For example, Millet’s *The Gleaners*, painted in 1857, depicts the arduous task of gleaning crops leftover once the harvest has been completed. This type of work is repetitive; it requires the worker to bend over, collect the crop, stand up, and bend over again to continue the process as nauseam. Courbet’s *Wheat Sifters* (fig. 6), of 1854 depicts a similarly repetitive task. The central figure is on her knees holding out the sifter in front of her, and shaking it to remove any impurities from the grain. In both of these paintings, the enduring sense of time is implied by the recursive nature of their work. Realist paintings such as these portrayed rural life in France as both slow and unchanging. Although at the time they were painted, the images were seen by some viewers as subversive or revolutionary, by the 1870s, as noted above, they had largely lost such connotations of political radicalism and were viewed nostalgically as images of a “simpler” era.

Yet the surface simplicity of these images belies the innovative engagement with concepts of temporality. Young notes that many of these Realist paintings in fact explore the complex relations between “old,” or traditional, and “new,” or modern, experiences of time.⁴³ For example, an extended analysis of Millet’s *The Angelus* (fig. 7), posits it as an image that represents a shift in the understanding of work time for agricultural laborers. Here, Millet has depicted two field workers who have heard the bells of the distant church, marking the end of their workday as well as the time for evening prayer. Previously, natural indicators such as sunrise and sunset determined the time for work in the fields. During the nineteenth century, however, there was a restructuring of local time through the standardization of the railroad

⁴³ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 37-39.

systems where clocks—instead of the sun—were used to determine time. Church bells began to function to mark times of day specified by the clock. Young highlights the point that this change in the telling of time indicates that rural regions were not immune to this type of modernization; though the rhetoric of Realist paintings tends to obscure this other discrepancy in the real versus ideal relationship of peasant to modernization. This rhetoric would continue to be relevant to Pissarro's peasant paintings in the 1880s.

The Persistence of Realism

As Young notes, Realism remained influential long after its initial appearance in the 1840s. In part, this influence can be attributed to frequent exhibitions of early Realist paintings during the 1860s and 70s.⁴⁴ Young also discusses the work of artists such as Bastien-Lepage and Jules Breton, who continued working in this vein even as alternatives such as Impressionism grew up alongside them. These two artists produced a number of paintings that specifically focused on peasant workers in ways that stress the theme of time. For example, Breton's depiction of a female field laborer in *The Song of the Lark* (fig. 8), highlights her identity as a worker.⁴⁵ She stands barefoot, in the middle of a harvested field. Her face is darkened from working in the sun. In her right hand she holds a sickle, which she would use to cut through grass in the field. The action of using a sickle is also repetitive: the user has to repeatedly swing the tool in order to cut through the grass or wheat. On the horizon, Breton painted a vibrant sunrise. The reference to the lark's song indicates that it is early morning and signals the scene is set at dawn, thereby signaling the beginning of the young woman's work and marking the specific

⁴⁴ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 1-9.

⁴⁵ Ryan, "The Peasant's Bond to Gaul, God, Land and Nature," 81.

temporality of this moment, similar to *The Angelus*.⁴⁶ Images like *The Song of the Lark* demonstrate that the popularity of peasant paintings, like Realism, did not fade after mid-century.

Bastien-Lepage's *Haymaking (Les Foins)*, painted in 1877, is also representative of the Realist "reclaiming" of the peasant during a period in which Impressionist artists—excluding Pissarro—turned to more "modern" subjects. In 1878, Bastien-Lepage exhibited *Haymaking* (fig. 9) at the Paris Salon; the painting quickly became a critical success. Critics who admired the painting viewed it as a representation of enduring, natural time associated with the experience of the rural peasant.⁴⁷ Young posits that the painting was designed to be viewed over an extended period of time, in a manner that paralleled the subject of the image. The compositional focus of *Haymaking* is a peasant man and woman in a state of rest, with the woman occupying the center of the composition.⁴⁸ She is seated with her legs extended in front of her, and with her shoulders and back rounded. Her posture and outward gaze suggest her exhaustion and much-needed break from work.

Yet while the subject in the foreground of this painting is clearly Realist, its setting displays the character of Impressionist *plein-air* painting. As Young points out, Bastien-Lepage had previously worked *en plein air*, as can be seen in his work *Summer Landscape (Paysage pour Les Foins)* (fig. 10) from 1876. The two paintings are similar in their use of muted tones and blended brushstrokes to represent the colors and textures of the field. There is no indication, however, that Bastien-Lepage posed the figures in the field—from the studies that survive, it is clear that the artist synthesized *plein air* landscape technique with studio painting. This

⁴⁶ This is my own analysis of Breton's painting *The Song of the Lark*.

⁴⁷ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 17-18.

⁴⁸ Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, 36. Ward has emphasized that the motif of the exhausted, resting worker multiplied in the work of Bastien-Lepage and his Realist peers during this period.

synthesis, significantly, illustrates Bastien-Lepage's apparent attempt to integrate conventional Realist subjects with the fleeting temporality of *en plein air* painting that was so intrinsically connected with the modernity of Impressionism. However, the figure of the woman and her companion are rendered in such detailed realism that the representation of the surrounding ground provides a jarring juxtaposition. Young states that "[u]ltimately, *Les Foins* must be understood as a temporally complex representation of a charged subject—an image, like those of Courbet and Millet, of peasant work and rest—grappling with the wider cultural transformations in the meaning and experience of time under modernity."⁴⁹ Effectively, Young argues that these Realist painters working in the 1870s and 1880s struggled to combine the two temporalities of old and new, of painting in the studio and *en plein air* and in fact did not succeed in doing so.

A few years after Bastien-Lepage's *Haymaking* was exhibited at the Salon, Pissarro was openly critical of the painting. In a letter to his son Lucien (who was an artist himself) Pissarro wrote that Bastien-Lepage's painting demonstrated "skill and nothing more," judging that "art" was not a part of it.⁵⁰ Pissarro's paintings of peasants from a few years later can be viewed as the artist's reworking of Bastien-Lepage's work in this critical vein. Although Bastien-Lepage tried to reconcile Impressionist instantaneity in his depiction of nature and Realist rendering of his figures, the resulting contrast is harsh and awkward. The treatment of the figures and the background are noticeably dissimilar—the clearly formed features of the woman and man are contrasted against the "sketchy" brushstrokes of the field. The incongruities suggest an experiment that is still in process. Pissarro appears to have taken up Bastien-Lepage's larger project of reconciling Realist subjects with Impressionist form and temporalities, though his

⁴⁹ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 45.

⁵⁰ Camille Pissarro to his son Lucien, January 21, 1884, in *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, vol. 1: 1865-1885, ed. by Janine Bailly-Herzberg (Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 1980), 276.

criticism of the work suggests that Pissarro was trying to revise Bastien-Lepage's approach. This is the context for the argument that Pissarro's paintings of peasant workers are in dialogue with the representation of subjects associated with the tradition of slow and enduring time. Pissarro was arguably more successful than Bastien-Lepage in his well-integrated portrayal of a Realist subject using Impressionist technique to portray the temporality experienced by rural laborer working in an increasingly modern environment. Therefore, Pissarro's paintings of agricultural workers provide a point of intersection between Impressionist preoccupation with instantaneity and Realist themes of enduring time, where, in contrast to the work of his immediate predecessors, technique and subject come together.

Indeed, Pissarro received some critical praise for his decision to exhibit paintings depicting rural life at the Impressionist exhibition of 1882. Armand Silvestre, wrote positively in *Le Monde des Arts* about Pissarro's works in the exhibition, noting that his paintings showed Millet's influence. Indicating Pissarro was not the only contemporary critical of Bastien-Lepage's work, Silvestre also compared the older artist's work favorably to recent Realist paintings by Bastien-Lepage:

I am very partial M. Pissarro's large figures, suffused as they are with a pastoral charm that is far more authentic than that of Bastien-Lepage's peasant women. I shall instance with absolute admiration *The Washerwoman* (fig. 11), *The Young Peasant Woman Having Coffee*, *The Young Peasant Woman with a Hat* (fig. 12)...All these portraits display the same sincerity in the sitter's appearance, the same truth in her posture, the same laborer's resignation⁵¹

⁵¹ Joachim Pissarro and Claire Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, *Pissarro: Critical Catalogue of Paintings* (Milan, Italy: Wildenstein Institute Publications, 2005), 426. *The Young Peasant Woman with a Hat* is another title given to the painting *Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat*. A number of the titles for Pissarro's paintings of agricultural laborers vary from publication and museum websites. This discrepancy can be attributed to Pissarro not providing his own titles for his works, as is the case with *Peasant Woman*, where scholars and curators ascribe their own titles, or could be due to issues in translation from French to English.

Here, Silvestre commended Pissarro's approach to depicting agrarian workers, deeming him more successful than Bastien-Lepage in representing the reality of their difficult lives. Clearly, viewers during Pissarro's own time saw parallels not with the other works on view at the Impressionist exhibition, but with Realists such as Bastien-Lepage, who showed their work in other venues. This further demonstrates the relationship between Pissarro and Realism.

Pissarro's Realism in Pontoise

Pontoise was the ideal place for Pissarro to experiment both with rural subjects and with Impressionist technique. Essentially, Pissarro was able to compartmentalize the rural areas and the markers of modernity in his paintings. Pissarro was also able to approach his subjects of agricultural laborers in a manner that did not make them appear outmoded but rather endowed them with a nuanced appearance and dignified status. Christopher Lloyd argues the importance of Pontoise for Pissarro, stating that "it is characteristic of Pissarro's art that he could discover the new in the old and that he could observe the habitual as though for the first time... This is why his paintings are the real sense of the word a revelation—the result of an exploration by a painter determined to be true to his own individuality."⁵² Here, Lloyd indicates that time as well as place are integral to Pissarro's technique and subject.

When Pissarro moved with his family to Pontoise in 1872, the small city was experiencing a period of economic prosperity and growth due to the construction of a railway that connected Pontoise to Paris (fig. 13).⁵³ Although Pontoise was more rural than the capital and its immediate suburbs, it was an important location for agricultural expansion and

⁵² Lloyd, "Camille Pissarro and the Essence of Place," 38.

⁵³ This would be the second time Pissarro's family had moved to Pontoise.

experienced the growing industrialization occurring throughout France. Pontoise was also a significant component of the French economic system because the food produced in the surrounding farms were then sent to the markets in Paris.⁵⁴

Agriculture and small industries thrived during the 1870s in Pontoise, but in particular localized farming in which the people cultivated produce in their own gardens was increasingly popular. A well-known location where these types of gardens flourished was the hamlet known as l'Hermitage, which was located along the Oise river on the edge of Pontoise.⁵⁵ In L'Hermitage, peasant families owned a small block of land but members of the village at times worked collectively to cultivate and sell produce at local markets in Pontoise. This small-scale form of agriculture placed the worker beside his means of survival and prosperity.⁵⁶

Pissarro took up residence in l'Hermitage and focused much of his artistic practice on painting the people who lived and worked in the community. The peasants he represented were often the rural workers who farmed their own gardens and also likely participated in the agricultural cultivation of the large farms surrounding Pontoise. Pissarro depicted both female and male peasants, in groups and alone. He often painted his images of these rural workers in the midst of their task or having just finished. Some paintings illustrate the actual work that the peasants performed, emphasizing either the gardens or the fields they cultivated.

During the period in which Pissarro lived in Pontoise the artist produced almost three hundred paintings of the town, its people, and the surrounding landscape.⁵⁷ Many of his paintings

⁵⁴ Lloyd, "Camille Pissarro and the Essence of Place," 36.

⁵⁵ Lloyd, "Camille Pissarro and the Essence of Place," 35-37.

⁵⁶ Simon Kelly and April M. Watson. *Visions of Nation from Le Gray to Monet* (Saint Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2013), 210.

⁵⁷ Lloyd, "Camille Pissarro and the Essence of Place," 34.

focused on the small houses and landscape of this place that for the most part had been untouched by modernity, and the male and female peasants who continued the traditional agricultural work there. Some paintings illustrate the actual work that the peasants performed, emphasizing either the gardens or the fields they cultivated. Pissarro often painted his images of these rural workers in the midst of their task or having just finished.

Although Pissarro primarily painted pastoral landscapes and scenes of rural work, he was not wholly dismissive of the modernization of the areas surrounding Pontoise. For example, L'Hermitage was not totally isolated from modernity—the neighborhood where Pissarro lived was less than a thirty-minute walk to the train station. Additionally, within a year of Pissarro's arrival, two factories opened on the opposite side of the river from Pontoise. Pissarro did not attempt to deny the existence of the markers of industrialization and progress, but instead created a few paintings that illustrated the factories integrated into part of the landscape. Factories were seen as indicators of efficiency and progress, associated with the rapidity in which they were built and helped facilitate production at a rate that was never seen before. Showing factories in a landscape painting signified the rapid, modern changes that the countryside around Paris was experiencing. In several paintings, Pissarro decided to include the industrialization represented by the factories surrounding Pontoise—depicting accurately the mix of industrial and agricultural terrain; *Factories near Pontoise* (fig. 14) and *The Oise near Pontoise* (fig. 15), were both painted in 1873. In both paintings, the smoke produced by the factory is blown by the wind and dissolves into the clouds. The smokestacks also mimic the erectness of the poplar trees, thereby formally and conceptually blending industry and nature together.

Pontoise was located close enough to Paris to make traveling between the two accessible, but it was slightly outside the scope of popular day trip locations for the Parisian elite. Pissarro's

friend and peer, Claude Monet, was involved in painting scenes of modernized landscapes as well, in nearby Argenteuil, although many of his images focused on bourgeois leisure.⁵⁸ The town of Argenteuil is an example of a growing industrial town in the late-nineteenth century, particularly after the devastation it sustained during the Franco-Prussian War and its need to rebuild its bridges. In *Le Pont de chemin de fer à Argenteuil* (fig. 16) Monet illustrated the encroaching modernity by representing a train speeding past on the newly built bridge while sailboats float by below. Argenteuil was a popular destination for wealthy Parisian day-trippers, many of whom Monet included in his paintings.⁵⁹ Although both Pontoise and Argenteuil were on the same rail line from Paris, Argenteuil appeared to be the more common destination for Parisians seeking refuge from the city in the countryside.

It was imperative that Pissarro was living and working in Pontoise rather than another town like Argenteuil the former town retained traditional cultivation practices (the presence of modernity, including factories and a railway notwithstanding). Although there were factories and a railway built, many citizens of Pontoise retained traditional cultivation practices. Lloyd continues his analysis, stating that “in effect, Pontoise is a nexus between two regenerative forces of French civilization—one medieval and rural and the other modern and urban.”⁶⁰

Work and Rest

Pissarro advocated that work could be an enabler of both mental and physical health.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Paul Hayes Tucker, "Bridges over the Seine" in *Monet at Argenteuil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 67.

⁵⁹ Tucker, "Bridges over the Seine," 70-72.

⁶⁰ Lloyd, "Camille Pissarro and the Essence of Place," 35.

⁶¹ Shiff, "The Restless Worker," 40.

However, he also understood the necessity for rest and leisure time away from work. Pissarro's figures are marked by their identities as laborers, but they are not meant to always be found at task. Brettell has made the argument that "Pissarro depicted an imagined rural paradise, in which work is collective and fulfilling and where there is something almost unknown in the tradition of French peasant painting that starts with Millet—leisure."⁶² In opposition to the belief of creating images of controlled and submissive workers, Pissarro shows his laborers with more autonomy and humanity. He does not try to show them as "lazy" but instead participating in a reality of the rural working-class.⁶³ Michel Melot observes that "there is nothing romantic in Pissarro's figures" and that they are not picturesque subjects but working women.⁶⁴ Although Pissarro made a number of works that focused on labor, he was also interested in representing the temporality of rest.

Pissarro began painting scenes of agricultural cultivation and field workers since the first time he and his family moved to Pontoise for the first time in 1866.⁶⁵ An example of one of his paintings produced during this first period in Pontoise that illustrated agricultural work is *l'Hermitage at Pontoise* (fig. 17). Painted in 1867, the painting focuses on the provincial house and landscape of the small village, where two figures in the foreground tend to the garden and another stands next to a bush with lush foliage. A number of scholars have made note that Pissarro's landscapes from the 1860s and early 1870s, often include figures either working or

⁶² Brettell, "Pissarro and Anarchism, 65.

⁶³ Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 17.

⁶⁴ Michel Melot, "Camille Pissarro in 1880: An Anarchistic Artist in Bourgeois Society," in *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism: An Anthology*, ed. by Mary Tomkins Lewis (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2007), 212-214.

⁶⁵ Adler, *A Time and a Place*, 14.

walking through the fields and gardens of the local town Pissarro chose to depict. According to Jane Munro, “Pissarro’s commitment to painting the rural life of France mean that his landscapes are generally populated, and—in the first part of his career, at least—the inhabitants are rarely depicted independently of the land from which they derived their existence.”⁶⁶ In *l’Hermitage at Pontoise*, the three figures almost seem collaged into the natural environment in which they work and their absence would not change the overall composition. The figures are so small that no other discernable features can be read besides that one figure is a man and the other two are women, indicated by their clothes. In this early painting of agricultural labor in his career, Pissarro was not interested in representing the individual worker. He was more concerned with depicting the overall landscape in which figures of workers were naturally integrated. Only later in his career would the worker become the central focus of his paintings.

When Pissarro returned to Pontoise after the Franco-Prussian War, he returned to the iconography of agricultural labor in the Pontoise landscape, but his approach was different. Christoph Becker notes that throughout the 1870s and early 1880s, the artist’s style transformed in part due to his involvement with Impressionism and also due to the influence of his studies of the Pontoise landscape.⁶⁷ The artist painted *Woman Herding a Cow* (fig. 18) in 1874, which depicts a woman leading a cow to graze in a field in the foreground while two other figures tend to a vegetable patch. The composition clearly focuses on the figures and their work due to their more prominent position within the landscape, although they are still anonymous to the viewers since Pissarro painted them in rear view. The field in which the woman and cow stand is similar to the one in Jules Bastien-Lepage’s *Haymaking (Les Foins)* discussed earlier in this chapter.

⁶⁶ Jane Munro, *French Impressionists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 98.

⁶⁷ Becker, "Camille Pissarro, Impressionist Artist," 56-57.

Both artists used flickering brushstrokes to render the grass, but unlike Bastien-Lepage use of a Realist style of painting to render his figures, Pissarro was consistent in his all-over use of the Impressionist technique in depicting the figures as well as the landscape.

Significantly, through the use of shadow, Pissarro provides indication of the time of day and in doing so creates a sense of temporal specificity. The exact time is not discernable, however; but because her shadow is short it can be assumed that this scene takes place sometime around noon.⁶⁸ Another marker of time in this painting is the two workers in the middle ground who are bent over to gathering crops, understood, as noted above, to be a serially repetitive task. Painted a few years later in 1879, Pissarro's *Vegetable Garden at l'Hermitage, Pontoise* (fig. 19) offers many of the same temporal cues as *Woman Herding a Cow*. Again, Pissarro depicted three figures (two in the foreground, one in the middle), but this time the workers tend to a local garden that was typical of the hamlet of l'Hermitage instead of the larger surrounding fields. The rose hue used throughout the entire composition combined with the long shadows of the woman and man in the foreground, signal that the figures are working in either the early morning or late afternoon. The repetitive and enduring nature of their work is emphasized by indicators in their surroundings, such as the woman standing up and the man on his knees, picking the plants in the garden. In Pissarro's paintings from the 1880s of agricultural workers, however, those markers of temporality become more ambiguous when the focus shifts to a singular figure, usually a female figure, as is the case with *Peasant Woman*.

Two images Pissarro made after 1880 explicitly depict these agricultural workers not working but enjoying a moment of rest. *Woman and Child at the Well* (fig. 20), painted in 1882, depicts a girl and a young woman in a garden together. The girl's back is to the viewer and she

⁶⁸ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 65. Clark, in discussions of Pissarro's agricultural scenes, proposes that shade represents the pastoral and the use of shade is meaningful.

faces the woman who leans against the wall of the well and appears to have her eyes closed. The woman's status as a worker is marked by her apron and hat, although significantly her clothes are not shown to be dirty.⁶⁹ She appears to be holding a watering can in her left hand, which is half hidden by her body, suggesting that she will return to her work. The woman's rest, however, is implied not only by her closed eyes but also by her leaning on the wall and her crossed feet. It would be difficult for her to stand up quickly; having her legs crossed in this manner indicates that she intended to stay in that position for a period of time to take the weight off of her feet. The time of day is not explicit, although there is a small patch of sky visible in the back. Repetitive time is signified not by either figures' actions but by the two watering cans on either side of the young woman. The task of watering the plants requires her to refill the cans from the well behind her, pour out the water and retrieve from the well until the plants are satiated.

Pissarro's *The Shepherdess* (fig. 21), painted a year before *Women and Child at the Well*, offers a different image of rest. The colors are darker in this image than in the later painting of *Women and Child at the Well*, suggesting that the girl has taken refuge in the shadow of the tree on the left side of the composition. It can be argued that Pissarro was representing this girl in the early evening, after she has finished her work day. According to Clark, "leisure (*otium*) is a time of day and a partial removal from sunlight."⁷⁰ The girl sits within a patch of grass, with leaves overlapping her skirt. She has taken repose from whatever duty she has been assigned, leisurely

⁶⁹ A further discussion about the clothes Pissarro's peasants wear is necessary as part of the analysis of his anarchist beliefs in the worker and collective. Predominately, Pissarro's field laborers wear clothes that are not dirty or ragged, as they would be for an actual outdoor worker they would be. Scholars have noted that this is part of Pissarro's perceived tendency to "idealize" his workers in that that he is not trying to emphasize their plight as low-class workers but signaling the dignity of their labor. It can also be argued that this trend of his figures dressed in clean clothes underscores the fact that the figures were often hired as models and he painted in his studio and not actually when these people were working.

⁷⁰ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 65.

lying down in the shade. Time is signified by her break from work. The young girl works in the land that also offers her repose. Octave Mirbeau, a writer and friend of the artist, commented that “it’s the life of the land that Camille Pissarro expresses, without resorting to sentimentality or extraordinary effects. More than any other, he will have been truly the painter of the soil and of our soil... When he paints figures in scenes of agrarian life, man always takes his proper place within a vast earthly harmony.”⁷¹ Pissarro’s agricultural laborers are inextricably linked to the enduring temporality of agrarian life, in that their life and work are dependent upon the natural times of the day as well as season.

⁷¹ Shiff, "Pissarro: Dirty Painter," 15-16.

CHAPTER 3

THE WORK OF PAINTING

Within Pissarro's oeuvre, his paintings of female workers are significant not just as the central subject of his images, but also for what they reveal about Pissarro's process of painting and the way he defined himself as an artist. Pissarro's working method will be the focus of this chapter. The superficial appearance of Pissarro's paintings in the Impressionist style seem "sketchy" and hastily done. Upon inspection, however, this is not true: close analysis reveals that the artist spent a significant amount of time on of his canvases. He not only planned his compositions out, using preparatory sketches, but also methodically and carefully executed each painting using a palette knife to create thick layers of paint. This chapter will analyze the temporality of work, both as depicted in Pissarro's paintings and as manifested in his own process. The predominant subjects—rural field laborers—exemplified to Pissarro the benefits of hard work; he arguably understood his own painting in roughly similar terms, as embodying concepts of labor tied to repetition and temporal duration.

In *Peasant Woman*, Pissarro is emphatic about the figure's identity as a rural laborer. He lived not in the modern city, but in the rural countryside alongside the field laborers he represented. As we have seen, he likely viewed his own artistic identity in analogous terms, equating his deliberate painting method to the temporality of field work the agricultural laborers in his paintings perform. In *Peasant Woman*, Pissarro combined the enduring temporality of agricultural work with the instantaneity of modernity through his methodical painting technique. This painting well correlates to Shiff's observation that "the peasant stood as a paradigmatic of Pissarro's concern's: the life of workers, the dignity and moral reward of work, the restorative benefit of being grounded in one's work—whether by contact with the soil of the fields or by

engagement with paint and canvas in studio.”⁷² Brettell, in discussing the themes of the Impressionists notes that “Pissarro, by contrast, was obsessed with a kind of pictorial time that the French call *la longue durée*: his landscape subjects are, by and large, traditionally rural with figures performing activities that similar figures had performed for centuries.”⁷³ Brettell means this in reference to subject matter, not technique. However, this thesis demonstrates that while Pissarro’s paintings may look instantaneous (i.e. Impressionist), it’s actually the product of a lengthy process. I argue that Pissarro was combining the painting technique of modernity with subjects of *la longue durée* or “the long duration.” As examined previously, the peasant’s association with enduring temporality was a fact that would have been understood as inherent in Pissarro’s paintings from Pontoise.

Time and Painting

To further underscore the idea of *la longue durée*, during the 1880s Pissarro spent a significant time sketching, planning and executing his paintings—essentially extending the process. Pissarro’s images of agricultural workers were not painted *en plein air* or outdoors, which disrupts the suggested instantaneity his Impressionist technique implied. This is not to say that Pissarro had not been well-established in the practice of painting *en plein air*. In his time working with Cézanne, there is sufficient documentation of the two artists painting outdoors together.⁷⁴ However, Brettell suggests, that Pissarro’s paintings of agricultural laborers from the period of the 1880s were produced not *en plein air* but indoors and that the artist was working

⁷² Shiff, "Pissarro: Dirty Painter," 15.

⁷³ Richard Brettell, *Impression: Painting Quickly in France, 1860-1890* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 212.

⁷⁴ Anthea Callen, *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique and the Making of Modernity*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 126-130.

his studio for the first time in his career.⁷⁵ This claim that Pissarro had never worked indoors is not entirely accurate, as Pissarro's training and studies as a young artist most likely combined both studio and *en plein air* painting. Anthea Callen, cites the example of *l'Hermitage at Pontoise*, stating that "Pissarro was at this stage of his career still following the traditional procedure of executing studies in the open air, then working up large-scale variants indoors in order to present carefully considered, finished pictures at the Salon."⁷⁶ It can be argued that Pissarro was in the early 1880s returning to an approach to painting with which he had familiarity but taking the style of Impressionism that he was currently working in to illustrate the laborers of the French countryside.

The traditional idea of the instantaneity in Impressionist art is challenged because Pissarro was doing what his Realist predecessors and contemporaries had done—sketch, draw, and plan out his compositions. He was not painting his figures "in the moment," but was instead taking subjects that he had studied, carefully, planning out compositions and applying the quick, short brushstrokes associated with Impressionism. Pissarro took a long time to work, but that the effect was to hide or partially erase that durational quality, so that the paintings appear to be made *en plein air*. Through his use of Impressionist brushwork, Pissarro created a sense of instantaneity that was then confronted by the enduring temporality of his figures and their work.

Painted during the same period as *Peasant Woman*, *Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat* is an example of a similar work that was shown at exhibition that is similar in style and subject. In *Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat*, a young girl is seated in front of an indistinguishable green background, similar to that found in *Peasant Woman*, with the focus on the subject and not her surroundings. The two works are approximately equal in size and may have been painted

⁷⁵ Brettell, *Pissarro's People*, 175.

⁷⁶ Callen, *Techniques of the Impressionists*, 46.

simultaneously, highlighting Pissarro's dedicated interest in representing these figures. He worked almost continuously on his images, producing a large number of works in a short period of time. It is interesting to note that Pissarro hired a model to pose for *Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat*, meaning that the sitter was not the intended owner of the portrait.⁷⁷ What this also means is that at least in some cases, Pissarro was not painting people he saw while walking around Pontoise and the rural landscape, but was constructing specific images with intention. It can be argued that Pissarro composed *Peasant Woman* in a similar way, perhaps not hiring a model specifically but indeed creating a composition that was thoughtfully planned and carefully executed. Pissarro's painting process and the extended time in which he took to make each painting will be addressed again later in this chapter.

Additionally, two sketches of female workers illuminate Pissarro's rigorous and repetitive studies of his subjects over a period of time. Made in 1884 and 1885, respectively, both *Young Female Peasant Leaning against a Tree* (fig. 22) and *Young Woman Standing, Holding a Stick in Her Hands* (fig. 23) depict female agricultural laborers, not working but resting. Particularly in *Young Female Peasant Leaning against a Tree* there are similarities between this woman using the tree as a support and the figure in *Woman and Child at the Well* using the well in order to rest. Although differences in the amount of time put into a sketch versus one of Pissarro's paintings are substantial, the necessity of creating preparatory drawings before executing the final product is conceptually comparable to the temporal sequence of the agrarian worker preparing the fields before planting or harvesting. The analogies in process might have served as one piece of inspiration for Pissarro's imagining his represented peasants as

⁷⁷ Brettell, *Pissarro's People*, 178.

a type of surrogates for his own experience with concepts of repetitive (if less arduous) labor, along with temporal sequences and duration.

Labor and Impressionism

Pissarro's commitment to the theme of the agricultural laborer distinguishes him from most of his Impressionist colleagues; however, he was not alone in his representations of workers. Both Gustave Caillebotte and Edgar Degas created images illustrating the difficult working conditions and life of various urban laborers. Unlike Caillebotte and Degas, though, Pissarro's images focused distinctly on traditionally unmodern modes of labor. Caillebotte in particular was interested in images of work, but his figures were situated within the urban working class. In *The Floor Scrapers* (fig. 24) from 1875, Caillebotte depicts a scene of the laborious and repetitive work carried out by three muscular men in a Parisian apartment. Degas, too, painted female workers from the city, such as *Women Ironing* (1884-86). All three artists also saw the advantage of spending time on each of their canvases and putting hard work into all of their paintings, often making preparatory studies and sketches of their subjects (fig. 25). Brettell has made this connection, contending that Pissarro and Caillebotte had similar approaches to painting, further arguing that "few of their surviving works could be considered in a study devoted to rapid painting, largely because both were committed to the creation of major works that reflect in their physical nature their making over a long period of time and careful planning before that."⁷⁸ These images of workers were not spontaneous creations, painted "in the moment" to capture a passing moment of the subject's day but were themselves works that were carried out over time thereby in a sense of conceptually mirroring the labor in the scene.

⁷⁸ Brettell, *Impression*, 212.

Pissarro is often compared to Impressionist colleagues such as Monet and Renoir; though they were not interested in representing “unmodern” figures as peasants, but instead focused on figures embodying the modernity of both urban cities and bourgeois leisure. In her instructive analysis of Impressionist painting technique, Anthea Callen has described the innovative style and subject of the new Paris. She writes that the “avant-garde Parisian artist was no longer the painter of agricultural life or peasants, but of modern city life—the sophisticated dandy’s world of cafés, racetracks, parks, concerts, balls, the opera and the ballet” and how “new subjects, a more direct representation of contemporary themes, demanded new techniques.”⁷⁹ What is so significant about Callen’s claim about Impressionist painting was that in fact, Pissarro *was* the painter of agricultural life and peasants in the 1870s and 80s but was using the new painting style of the modern age in order to represent his subjects. To many people who were living outside of the urban centers, the peasant *was* still part of contemporary life—peasant agricultural laborers were still working in the fields, cultivating the produce and goods for the people that lived in the cities. As discussed in Chapter Two, Pissarro did not wholly ignore modern developments and infrastructure in his paintings. However, the primary subjects of most of his works were arguably in opposition to the types of subjects usually associated with Impressionism.

Temporality and *Peasant Woman*

The temporal moment of *Peasant Woman*, as mentioned earlier, has not been made explicit. Pissarro has framed the figure to remove any indication of her specific work; she is a worker. Her shoulders are broad and her arms are thick, as if she has spent ample time lifting and carrying heavy objects or tending to gardens. Richard Brettell has suggested that the model for

⁷⁹ Callen, *Techniques of the Impressionists*, 22.

this painting was Pissarro's wife, Julie. Julie herself came from a rural background and became the example of the woman-worker in providing for her family through agricultural work. She kept the garden by their house and harvested it to provide food for the family. Julie, who grew up in a working-class family, was able to endure the efforts of growing and harvesting food, cooking and keeping a house, and raising children without the luxuries afforded to women of the Bourgeoisie.⁸⁰ In Pissarro's life, Julie was the embodiment of the prosperous, rural worker. Additionally, Clark argues that the type of lifestyle that Pissarro depicted was not a romantic desire of retrieving something from the past. He states that "there was a form of life still actually existing in the nineteenth century...that stood in the way of modernity, and resisted the disenchantment of the world."⁸¹ This was the iconography that Pissarro wanted to illustrate.

In *Peasant Woman*, we can see the complexity of the temporal cues Pissarro gives the viewer. There is no indication of her labor, but her clothes and her outdoor location suggests that she is in the middle of her work and has taken a momentary break. In a pose that emphasizes her exhaustion, she gazes downward at something out of view and rests her hand on her waist. However, her off-center placement in the composition and the slight sway of her body suggests her movement, underscoring the momentariness of her rest. She is not completely still. The ambiguity about time is inherent in this image, not only just of the inferred momentariness of her rest, but also in the question of what type of work she performs and as well as the time of day. Unlike some of Pissarro's earlier images of labor, like *Woman Herding a Cow*, where the blue sky is clearly visible, *Peasant Woman* contains no horizon line, no perception of the sun. The overlapping branches and leaves erase any trace of sky that would provide context to the time of day. This scene could be taking place at any point during the day, in an undetermined season.

⁸⁰ Brettell, *Pissarro's People*, 83-85

⁸¹ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 71.

The vibrant green and the fullness of the foliage suggests that the season might be either the spring or summer, but the time of year is still vague. There are no objects to indicate what kind of agrarian labor she performs that might offer clues as to whether she is planting or harvesting.

Pissarro employed Impressionist brushwork throughout the entire composition, accentuating the temporal quality of her repose. However, the actual application of the paint took time to complete while working in his studio. The fracture reveals a deliberate overlapping of color, a method that would have been time consuming and repetitive. Looking closely at the woman's shirt reveals the thick, cross-hatch strokes of various colors, layered to emulate the rough texture of the fabric. Similarly, the tree branches and leaves have been worked together, creating an indistinguishable background. Through the combination of these two styles, Pissarro illustrates the "temporal bilingualism" of this period in which new and old conceptions of time confront one another.⁸² His figures and method of painting are linked to an enduring and slow temporality while the representation of his subjects is suggestive of the instantaneity of modernity. In *Peasant Woman*, Pissarro depicted a moment of rest for the agricultural laborer, but his use of Impressionist technique to render the figure and her surroundings suggests that her rest is only momentary.

Pissarro as Worker

Pissarro may also have seen himself as a worker like his subjects, equating his deliberate painting method to the field work the agricultural laborers in his paintings perform. In one of his letters to his eldest son Lucien, Pissarro admits that he has "the temperament of a peasant."⁸³ He

⁸² Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism*, 8.

⁸³ Camille Pissarro to his son Lucien, November 20, 1883, in *Letters to His Son Lucien*, ed. by John Rewald (Boston, MA: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 2002), 47.

was not trying to distance himself from his subjects, but to affirm their similarities. Although she is resting from her work, the ephemerality of the moment underscores her eventual return to it. The significance of Pissarro showing these figures at rest demonstrates a break in the continuous cycle of work according to which people—because these were people whom Pissarro knew—need time to rest in order to continue their task. Brettell makes clear in his observation that “Pissarro’s rural workers work *and* rest, leading lives in which their bodies are strong as a result of their work and their minds are lively, fruit of their leisure.”⁸⁴

The repetitive nature of agricultural work is similar to Pissarro’s artistic practice of the building up of paint and color, again and again. Shiff has advocated that “Pissarro’s special sense of the “work” of painting became central to the redeeming social value his advocates perceived in his art.”⁸⁵ Similar to the laborers who harvest produce from the gardens in *l’Hermitage*, where they bend over, gather the cabbages and potatoes, stand up and then bend over once again. Agrarian work was time consuming and it required stamina and patience to be a rural worker. Pissarro himself was a laborer and took time to complete his task. He lived not in the modern city, but in the rural countryside alongside the field laborers he represented. A writer and friend of Pissarro, Octave Mirbeau, recalled what the artist had said about his paintings: “Work [*travail*] is a marvelous regulator of moral and physical health. All the sadness, all the bitterness, all the grief—I forget, I overlook in these in the joy of working.”⁸⁶ In *Peasant Woman*, Pissarro combined the enduring temporality of agricultural work with the instantaneity of modernity through his methodical painting technique. He worked the surface of the canvas with paint

⁸⁴ Brettell, "Pissarro and Anarchism," 65.

⁸⁵ Shiff, "The Restless Worker," 37.

⁸⁶ Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," 7.

similarly to how one of his laborers would work the land for cultivation. Pissarro desired to be like the agrarian workers he lived with in Pontoise and treated his own “work” as both an image and representation of labor.

Beginning in the late 1870s and continuing into the next decade, Pissarro became very concerned with the preparation of his paintings, favoring a slow and methodical process. This interest can be argued as prefiguring his later foray with Neo-Impressionism, which was very concerned with planned execution of works.⁸⁷ Although Pissarro’s involvement with Neo-Impressionism is significant in terms of his total career, this thesis is only concerned with the few years prior to the establishment of this new artistic mode, when Pissarro was still entrenched in the style of Impressionism. His work may be characterized by the typical “sketchy” quality of Impressionist painting, but as this chapter has made evident, Pissarro’s method was much more thorough and deliberate. Reiterating this point, Brettell notes how Pissarro, similar with “the impressions of Sisley, Renoir, and Monet...worked hard to make a two- or three-step process look like a one-step process.”⁸⁸

In another letter to Lucien, Pissarro described his reasoning behind such a methodical painting process. Pissarro wrote:

I do not believe that anyone could devote—if not more talent—more care and good will to the service of his art; it takes me hours of reflection to decide on the slightest detail; is this impatience?...I think not! For I do not wish to make a brush stroke when I do not feel complete mastery of my subject, there’s the rub—that is the great difficulty; without sensation, nothing, absolutely nothing valid.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Brettell, *Impression*, 219.

⁸⁸ Brettell, *Impression*, 216.

⁸⁹ Camille Pissarro to his son Lucien, April 26, 1888, in *Letters to His Son Lucien*, 124.

The very small, deliberate brushstrokes allowed Pissarro much more control but also greater use of varied colors. The repetitive manner in which the paint had been applied, layer upon layer, creates a type of order to the composition.⁹⁰ Each brushstroke was the result of a deliberate consideration by the artist. Ward has observed in *Peasant Woman* that Pissarro attempted to create a sense of balance in his painting, placing his strokes in such a way that resulted in an overall thickness.⁹¹ Callen notes that during the 1880's Pissarro "used a more controlled, directional touch" which was inspired by his close working relationship with Cézanne.⁹² Both Pissarro and Cézanne allowed their paintings to reveal the process of their work by making obviously apparent each brushstroke—they were not concerned with creating "a traditional degree of finish."⁹³ This "finish" did not mean that Pissarro was interested in making his images so complete that any traces of the artist's touch would become inconsequential to the overall work. Rather, Pissarro wanted to make apparent his mark, his intervention of the paint on the canvas, much like a worker making rows in a field.

⁹⁰ John House, *Impressionist Masterpieces: National Gallery of Art, Washington* (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1985), 86.

⁹¹ Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, 31

⁹² Callen, *Techniques of the Impressionists*, 105-106.

⁹³ Shiff, "Pissarro: Dirty Painter," 24.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this thesis was to assess the unique combination of Realist subject matter and Impressionist technique in Camille Pissarro's peasant paintings in order to consider the ways in which his work related to both major art movements. Realism, as Marnin Young has argued, did not disappear and give way to Impressionism, but rather persisted, with many Impressionist artists showing work alongside paintings by Jean-François Millet, and Gustave Courbet, and the next generation of Realist paintings. Pissarro's *Peasant Woman* exemplifies this coexistence, and the possibilities for mapping out particular intersection between Impressionism and Realism. The figure is a field worker, placed in an outdoor setting but the temporality of her position is uncertain. The nature of her work and the time of day are unclear. Her identity as a rural laborer, however, associates her with the tradition of slow and enduring time; but the manner in which she is depicted is ephemeral and fleeting. *Peasant Woman* is the embodiment of what has been termed "temporal bilingualism", the bringing together of two opposing understandings of time.

However, I emphasize that although Pissarro was a part of these groups, he was also distinctly separate from most of them. He was clearly doing something different than his peers and his images of agricultural laborers should be given new consideration. Pissarro was innovative in his use of the new modern Impressionist technique with motifs that seemed at first glance, unfit for the style. Therefore, I argue that Pissarro should be reevaluated, in relation to his works at Pontoise in particular, in terms of both his Impressionist and Realist artistic interests, and in light of his efforts to reconcile particular traits of each to successfully thematize the nature of rural labor.

This thesis also did not heavily rely on an analysis of Pissarro's anarchist politics, though I discussed his beliefs to demonstrate that they were an essential factor for his choice of location

and subjects. Pissarro thought that art should be accessible for all. He also believed that hard work was necessary but advocated for time to rest. Richard Shiff made the observation that “[f]or better or worse, the therapeutic, leisure value of art has been repeatedly acknowledged as a social benefit, certainly by the psychoanalytic profession, although art historians often seem to regard this connection as demeaning, perhaps because it undermines elitist distinctions. Yet this, in turn, is precisely why Pissarro painted—to eliminate hierarchy and privilege.”⁹⁴ Thus, we might view Pissarro’s innovations in the context of wanting to paint both for himself and for the workers as well.

⁹⁴ Shiff, "The Restless Worker," 43.

APPENDIX A

CAMILLE PISSARRO'S EARLY LIFE, EDUCATION, AND COLLABORATION WITH THE IMPRESSIONISTS

On the Periphery

Camille Pissarro is known both for his many landscape paintings of the French countryside and as well for his city scenes of Parisian boulevards. An illness he contracted later in his life forced Pissarro to move from the countryside to Paris and work indoors. During the last decade of his life he painted more than three hundred images of urban rather than rural life.⁹⁵ Pissarro's childhood and early life experiences were different from those of his Impressionist colleagues thus providing him with a sympathetic view of certain groups of people.

Although he came from a wealthy family and was afforded many opportunities, Pissarro's exposure to marginalized people who performed labor intensive jobs, arguably influenced his later political beliefs. Both of Pissarro's parents were Sephardic Jews.⁹⁶ Despite growing up in a bourgeois household, Pissarro's family was isolated from the Jewish community on the island. This isolation forced Pissarro's parents to send their children to a Protestant school.⁹⁷ Slavery still existed in the Danish West Indies at the time and many children of black slaves were also sent to the same school as the Pissarro children run by the Moravian Church on the island. It is likely that Pissarro and his brothers were the only white students amongst their

⁹⁵ Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," 11.

⁹⁶ Adler, *A Time and a Place*, 5.

⁹⁷ Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," 1.

classmates.⁹⁸ It was also at this school is where Pissarro apparently was exposed to lessons in both drawing and painting.⁹⁹

After his time at boarding school in France and living abroad briefly in Venezuela, it quickly became apparent to Pissarro and his family that he could not continue living in Saint Thomas if he were to pursue a career in painting. In 1855 Pissarro moved to France permanently. His family also left Saint Thomas to follow Pissarro to France and initially supported him financially while he continued to study painting. Pissarro initially lived in an apartment paid for by his parents and rented his own studio.¹⁰⁰ He quickly became in contact with French landscape painter Camille Corot who was associated with the group of painters working near the Forest of Fontainebleau. The Barbizon School, named after the small village near the forest, influenced to how Pissarro approached landscape painting through their tendency to depict the peculiarity of the natural environment and the landscape itself being subject. Corot became Pissarro's informal mentor.¹⁰¹ By 1859 Pissarro was showing his work in the Paris Salon.¹⁰²

Pissarro met the person with whom he would develop one of the most important relationships in his life in the early 1860's. Julie Velley was an assistant cook in Pissarro's mother's home. Julie came from a modest, working-class background of land-owning peasantry and grew up in a small village.¹⁰³ Despite protests from his mother and the differences in their

⁹⁸ Pissarro, "Pissarro's Memory," 22.

⁹⁹ Adler, *A Time and a Place*, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Becker, "Camille Pissarro, Impressionist Artist," 38.

¹⁰¹ Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," 2.

¹⁰² Adler, *A Time and a Place*, 11.

¹⁰³ Brettell, *Pissarro's People*, 88.

social standing, Pissarro pursued a relationship with Julie Velley, although they did not marry right away. In 1863, Julie gave birth to the couple's eldest son Lucien and they would go on to have six more children.¹⁰⁴ It is evident in the way Pissarro wrote about his wife that he was always extremely fond and trusting of her. Due to Julie's rural upbringing, she was well adept at keeping a full kitchen garden and some livestock in order to feed her family.¹⁰⁵ Julie was the practical and self-sustaining model of rural life that Pissarro so much idealized to be the standard in modern society.

Some scholars have suggested that Pissarro's later anarchism and atheism was due in part to his family's alienation from the Jewish community when he was young. However, when Pissarro began a relationship with Julie, he renounced his family's bourgeois position in society.¹⁰⁶ Pissarro rejected the values of his family's business background that focused on money and property as a measure of success. Instead he favored a property-less life and a commitment hard work. Early on in his time in France, Pissarro began to read anarchist literature and meet with other politically active people. He followed closely the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Peter Kropotkin. Pissarro was interested in having his political ideologies represented in his art.¹⁰⁷ He also advocated for better working conditions for laborers where leisure time would be guaranteed and "the greatest opportunity for aesthetic development in the individual."¹⁰⁸ Pissarro wanted to create art that was accessible and identifiable with the

¹⁰⁴ Becker, "Camille Pissarro, Impressionist Artist," 38.

¹⁰⁵ Brettell, *Pissarro's People*, 88.

¹⁰⁶ Pissarro, "Pissarro's Memory," 24.

¹⁰⁷ Brettell, "Pissarro and Anarchism," 56-58.

¹⁰⁸ Shiff, "The Restless Worker," 38.

“masses”—those who spent their entire lives working, whether they were rural peasants or urban laborers. Pissarro rebelled against the bourgeois life his family had established and began to cultivate his own sense of individuality that would differentiate his later work.¹⁰⁹

Working with the Collective Group

Throughout his career, Pissarro was committed to painting landscapes, stemming from both his early painting in Saint Thomas and his work with the Barbizon School artists.¹¹⁰ However, Pissarro’s initial interest in rural and natural landscapes would have become challenged by the increasingly modern landscape in the suburbs and countryside surrounding Paris in the Île-de-France. There were a number of artists with whom Pissarro had already established relationships who were at that moment experimenting with new painting techniques. Edouard Manet’s novel approach to painting scenes of modern life would set the ground work for a group of artists who would continue to push the boundaries of the established institutions. Pissarro was deeply committed to this group of artists and acted as mentor to many of the younger painters of the proceeding generation in the decades that followed.

Pissarro was also deeply influenced by his collaboration with a number of contemporary artists including Monet, Paul Cézanne, and George Seurat. The supportive artistic relationship and personal friendship between Pissarro and Cézanne in particular was one of the most important working relationships for Pissarro. Though each had his own individual style, they

¹⁰⁹ Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," 2.

¹¹⁰ Levitov, "Paths to Pissarro," 3. During the first few years after Pissarro moved back to France, he continued painting Caribbean scenes and subjects, which he initially became interested while living in Saint Thomas. Many of the figures are Caribbeans of African descent, demonstrating his early commitment to non-bourgeois people and manual labor. This arguably influenced his later attachment to the working class and rural laborers in France.

worked very closely with one another and often painted the same scene simultaneously during the early 1870s. Pissarro was demonstrating that he was open to new ideas and even sought out inspiration from other artists who held similar beliefs.¹¹¹

Spontaneity and speed is often associated with the painting technique employed by the Impressionist artists working in France in the late nineteenth century. However, some scholars have argued that Pissarro was one of the few artists who resisted superficially spontaneous painting and instead was more interested in complex layering of color and texture on the canvas.¹¹² This points to the fact that Pissarro was never static in his style during his long career, but continuously evolving and experimenting. However, this also poses a dilemma for scholars attempting to define Pissarro within a specific artistic group, precisely because he did not limit himself to a single mode of representation. Pissarro cultivated his own painting process, experimenting with different techniques but ultimately choosing subjects that contradicted the temporality of the style in which they were depicted.

¹¹¹ Pissarro, *Pioneering Modern Painting*, 42.

¹¹² Brettell, *Impression*, 212.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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Figure 1: Camille Pissarro, *Portrait of a Peasant Woman* (1880). Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 2: Edouard Manet, *The Railway* (1873). Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 3: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Grenouillère* (1869). Oil on canvas. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

Figure 4: Claude Monet, *The Gare St.Lazare* (1877). Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, London.

Figure 5: Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners* (1857). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 6: Gustave Courbet, *The Wheat Sifters* (1854). Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes.

Figure 7: Jean-François Millet, *The Angelus* (1855-1857). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 8: Jules Breton, *The Song of the Lark*, (1884). Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 9: Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Haymaking (Les Foins)* (1877). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 10: Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Summer Landscape (Paysage pour Les Foins)* (1876). Oil on canvas. Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris.

Figure 11: Camille Pissarro, *Washerwoman* (1880). Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 12: Camille Pissarro, *Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat* (1881). Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 13: Théodore Muller, *Design for an Urban Project in Pontoise* (1864). Lithograph. Musée Pissarro, Pontoise.

Figure 14: Camille Pissarro, *Factories near Pontoise* (1873). Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts.

Figure 15: Camille Pissarro, *The Oise near Pontoise* (1873). Oil on canvas. Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Figure 16: Claude Monet, *Le Pont de chemin de fer à Argenteuil* (1873). Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Figure 17: Camille Pissarro, *l'Hermitage at Pontoise* (1867). Oil on canvas. Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, Germany.

Figure 18: Camille Pissarro, *Woman Herding a Cow*, (1874). Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Figure 19: Camille Pissarro, *Vegetable Garden at l'Hermitage, Pontoise* (1879). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 20: Camille Pissarro, *Woman and Child at the Well* (1882). Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

Figure 21: Camille Pissarro, *The Shepherdess* (1881). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 22: Camille Pissarro, *Young Female Peasant Leaning against a Tree* (1884). Chalk and watercolor on paper. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.

Figure 23: Camille Pissarro, *Young Woman Standing, Holding a Stick in Her Hands* (1885). Pastel over charcoal sketch on cream laid paper. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 24: Gustave Caillebotte, *The Floor Scrapers* (1875). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 25: Edgar Degas, *Women Ironing* (1884-86). Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

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