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Views from the Window: Conveying Harmony Under Different Atmospheric Conditions in
Camille Pissarro's *Boulevard Montmartre* Series

It has been argued that within the circle of well-known Impressionist painters, no other artist has been less recognized for their contribution to the movement than Camille Pissarro. Pissarro may have produced more Impressionist versatility in his collection of work than any other artist while also achieving the highest degree of individuality in his artistic techniques. In the spring of 1874, Pissarro was a critical figure in the planning of the first Impressionist exhibition and was the only artist to be featured at all eight of the exhibitions dedicated to the Impressionist artists. This new art movement emerged during a period of rapid social change and growing industrialization with more people moving to cities throughout the 19th century. During Baron Haussmann's renovation of Paris, he demolished buildings to make way for the broad boulevards to appeal to the emergence of the new bourgeoisie. Therefore, the Impressionists developed a the new technique of small, individual brushstrokes that created the impression of a subject rather than rendering a realistic image. In Pissarro's works, he implemented this technique to capture the spontaneity of nature and how the conditions, the weather and time of day affected his scenes. Pissarro's Boulevard Montmartre series is a first-rate example of this implementation to create compositional harmony while depicting different atmospheric conditions from the same perspective. By studying four examples from the series and connecting the series to his biography and social context of the time, I argue that it is his specific use of

creating tonal relationships and procedures of depicting light that exemplify how Impressionists viewed the world and were able to capture it on their canvases.

Pissarro decided to pursue an art career in his mid-twenties and relocated to Paris in 1855. He studied at both the Académie Suisse and the École des Beaux-Arts where he learned of the old masters as well as contemporary artists. However, he believed its instructional methods to be restrictive and decided to continue his art studies outside of school, most notably with the French artist Camille Corot who inspired Pissarro to paint en plein-air, introducing him to the major change of technique that Impressionists built on.¹ Pissarro truly embraced this technique and for the rest of his career aimed to produce harmonious images of figural impressions. Pissarro's paintings are characterized by the composition of taches (spots) that he purposefully decides not to blend together to strive for “economy and elegance in his notation, using the simplest, sparest, means to achieve the most vivid and compelling effect.”² Pissarro places a strong emphasis on creating a continuous harmony throughout his compositions. He once stated to a journalist:

I only see flecks. When I start a picture, the first thing that I try to establish is the harmony. Between this sky and this ground and this water there is, of necessity, a tonal relationship, and that is the great difficulty in painting... The great problem that has to be solved, is the matter of relating everything in the picture, even the smallest details, to the overall harmony, that is to say, making everything sound harmoniously together.³

His Boulevard Montmartre series is a prime example of these desires. In this series,

He continued to pursue his long-standing quest to convey impressions of light and color, but with the added notion that he needed to create more than one painting of each scene to explore and convey the changing effects of light and weather to the fullest extent. He

¹ “Boulevard Montmartre: ImpressionistArts,” ImpressionistArts.com, March 17, 2023, <https://impressionistarts.com/camille-pissarro-boulevard-montmartre>.

² Terence Maloon, *Camille Pissarro* (Sydney N.S.W., Australia: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005), 99.

³ Hans Graber, *Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Claude Monet: Nach Eigenen Und Fremden Zeugnissen* (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1943), 106.

found the unity he had long sought by creating a harmony of colors and tones and by applying a consistent brushstroke across the entire surface of the canvas.⁴

In 1872, Pissarro's friend and fellow artist Ludovic Piette wrote to him saying:

I have always loved the immense streets of Paris, shimmering in the sun, the crowd of all colors, those beautiful linear and aerial perspectives, those eccentric fashions, etc. But how to do it? To install oneself in the middle of the street is impossible in Paris.⁵

This subject piqued Pissarro's interest and in 1897 he embarked upon a series of paintings to attempt to tackle this question. In February of that year he booked a room at the Hôtel de Russie on the corner of the Boulevard des Italiens and the Rue Drouot and stayed there till April. On the 10th of February, he wrote to his son, Georges Pissarro, and said: "I have begun my series of Boulevards. I have a splendid motif, which I am going to explore under all possible effects."⁶ He painted fourteen different variations of the same perspective "representing a single motif seen under different combinations of light, weather and seasonal change" including winter and spring, sunshine and rain, early morning to late in the night through the view out his window.⁷ Art historian and the great-grandson of Camille, Joachim Pissarro, stated that his "approach to this series was capable of producing an infinite number of possibilities" and the "views of the Boulevard Montmartre are now considered to be the most innovative and masterful series in Pissarro's oeuvre."⁸

It should be noted that this series was not only a practice in Impressionist technique but had other motivations as well. There was economic success in painting cityscapes, "Quite simply

⁴ Ann Dumas and Xavier Bray, *Inspiring Impressionism: The Impressionists and the Art of the Past: High Museum of Art, Atlanta October 16, 2007 - January 13, 2008 ; Denver Art Museum February 23 - May 25, 2008 ; Seattle Art Museum June 19 - September 21, 2008* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2007), 38.

⁵ Maloon, 185.

⁶ Joachim Pissarro and Richard R. Brettell, *The Impressionist and the City: Pissarro's Series Painting*, ed. MaryAnne Stevens (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 59.

⁷ "Boulevard Montmartre: ImpressionistArts".

⁸ Ibid.

they sold better and more quickly... enabling the elder Pissarros to pay off their debts, support their children, and enjoy a life of unprecedented comfort.”⁹ However, unfortunately it would be a physical limitation that prompted Pissarro to embark on this series. Pissarro was diagnosed with dacryocystitis, a chronic infection of the tear duct which as a consequence led to most of the paintings from the last fifteen years of his life to be viewed from windows.¹⁰ His physician “discouraged him from painting directly out-of doors in order to avoid wind, inclement weather, and excessive light” which is ironic, as that is what he chose to portray in many of his works depicting variations of weather and how the effects of light played a significant role in capturing the harmony of the image.¹¹ Although Pissarro was unable to paint en plein air anymore, it did not stop him from painting the outside world.

What unequivocally brings the series together is the same perspective and cropping that each of the fourteen canvases have. “The perspective is strictly defined by the plunging, inverted ‘V’ of the Boulevard Montmartre, firmly delineated laterally by the two rows of trees and houses on each side of the road.”¹² Typically Impressionists, “rejected the one point perspective that creates the illusion of a window onto the world, common an old, master painting” but Pissarro does just that as he perhaps learned of that style while at school.¹³ Although not a distinguished practice of other Impressionists to create one point perspective cityscapes, the practice of creating a series on capturing different weather effects of the same subject is a common theme to explore such as in Claude Monet’s Haystacks series. These series are a lesson in observation to practice different technical applications. The Boulevard Montmartre series is distinctly

⁹ Joachim Pissarro et al., xxviii.

¹⁰ Maloon, 185.

¹¹ Joachim Pissarro et al., xxviii.

¹² Ibid, 59.

¹³ Ann Dumas et al., 38-40.

systematic, with each painting containing the view of the long, broad boulevard with buildings on each side and a glimpse of the sky. The perspective of the series is to view the streets of Paris how Pissarro would have seen them from his window, however, “reveal no hint of the physical constrictions of their making. The viewer is never given the opportunity to think about Pissarro himself. Never do we see a window frame” or any reference to an interior scene.¹⁴ Because “self-consciousness is absent” Pissarro places more emphasis on the view and his varying technique of deciphering how to illustrate different types of weather and various times of day.¹⁵ By “allowing the viewer a kind of liberation to reflect on the subject of the painting itself rather than on the life, mood, psychology, or identity of the painter” the paintings offer viewers a lesson in observing the capabilities of how to represent any day nature they could experience outside in the form of art.

Pissarro was capable of doing so as, “The thing uppermost in Pissarro’s mind was the minutely precise observation of atmospheric changes that came with the passing of the seasons and the times of the day.”¹⁶ Joachim Pissarro stated that his great-grandfather “was motivated in this series by a desire to exhaust the pictorial resources offered by all the effects.”¹⁷ He does this through focusing on color and light. The change of light according to the progression of the day was a sustained interest to Pissarro in the elaboration of the series. He treated “the architecture as a sort of light-struck canyon wall that serves as the backdrop for human activity.”¹⁸ The buildings in the paintings give the first impression of how light has affected the scene as they are the largest subject and carry the eye further into the paintings. Pissarro is able to distinctly paint how

¹⁴ Joachim Pissarro et al., xxviii.

¹⁵ Ibid, xxix.

¹⁶ Christoph Becker et al., *Camille Pissarro* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 1999), 134.

¹⁷ Joachim Pissarro et al., 60.

¹⁸ Ibid, xxii.

light is reflected off of them, highlights certain areas, or with its absence conceals sections.

Pissarro “knows how to produce light by means of color... he remembers all changes that happen in [the] phenomena of light” which is all dependent on the day and time at which the painting was done.¹⁹ In a comment to his doctor, Pissarro states that: “Every morning I am at my observation post until twelve noon and even until half twelve, and in the afternoons from two until half past five” verifies that Pissarro was persistent at working at different times of day to captures these differences of light and atmospheric changes.²⁰

The tonal relationship that Pissarro builds throughout his compositions elicit the harmony that he desired. He experimented with paint and blending various tones with one foundational color to achieve an overall atmospheric effect against the entire scene. Art Historian, Henry G. Stephans stated:

For Pissarro earth and heaven, water and sky, animals and people, all shine with the tints from which the local color changes almost entirely into another color, exactly as it is in nature. Pissarro never forgets how to harmonize the supplementary color according to the tone of light used in the picture, nor how to balance them. He harmonizes the local colors in such a way that the color of the paint changes entirely into the natural color of objects, seen in certain distances... he sees connections of mutual dependence between all phenomena of light and colors.²¹

The effect that this gives is to provide viewers with an accurate representation of the world he viewed outside his window but not only as a visual imitation but these paintings carry an emotional tone as well depending on the weather depicted that alters the viewers mood. Stephans furthers this thought with, “by the magic of his brush and his wonderful feeling for color to the canvases, so the spectator may feel the chill of a wintery sky at one moment, only to be warmed

¹⁹ Henry G Stephans, “Camille Pissarro, Impressionist,” Internet Archive (Brush and Pencil, March 1, 1904), <https://archive.org/details/jstor-25503707>, 422.

²⁰ Janine Bailly-Herzberg and Camille Pissarro, *Correspondance De Camille Pissarro* (Presses universitaires de France, 1989), 327.

²¹ Stephans, 422.

the next by the fervid glow of a summer sky.”²² In every picture, there was not a single patch of unmixed hue.²³ The colors are all diluted to the same tonal range, which contributes to maintaining the harmony and conveying the overall presence of the day or night.

In *Boulevard Montmartre Winter Morning* (1897) (Figure 1) shades of blue, purple, and pink are used to curate the somber tone of a cold morning in the darker season. There is a subtle haze of a morning mist by the blur seen in the trees and receding street. Pissarro utilizes color theory to perceive distance. He uses darker shades of blue on the roofs of the front buildings and on the trunks of the closest trees to make them appear closer than the background scenery that is in a pale blue and is more blurred.²⁴ Here, light is used to emphasize distant morning fog where a higher visibility would be seen closer to where the view was seen.

Alternatively, *Boulevard Montmartre Afternoon Sunshine* (1897) (Figure 2) contains brighter tones of yellow and red contrasted against a blue, cloudy sky to illustrate a blissful day outside which is emphasized by the large number of people Pissarro paints out on the boulevard. Light is bounced all around the picture plane especially on the tops of the buildings where the sun would hit. This sunshine allows Pissarro to paint the buildings with more detail as compared to the mist-covered ones in *Boulevard Montmartre Winter Morning*. The brighter tones allude to a more optimistic image of the Parisian street.

²² Stephans, 421.

²³ Meir Ronnen. “Pissarro's Grand Boulevard: [Magazine Edition].” Jerusalem Post, Jul 04, 1997. <https://uc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnewspapers%2Fpissarro-grand-boulevard%2Fdocview%2F319196331%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D2909>.

²⁴ “The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning,” *The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning* by Camille Pissarro, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://www.thehistoryofart.org/camille-pissarro/boulevard-montmartre-on-a-winter-morning/>.

Optimism is also conveyed in *Boulevard Montmartre Spring* (1897) (Figure 3) where Pissarro renders the changing of the season from winter to spring and showcases the bright green foliage of the blooming trees. It portrays nature at its finest with the swirled, fluffy clouds and the shadows of the leaves on the ground of the boulevard. Sunlight hits the left buildings while the right is encased in shadow suggesting transition of time of day. Pissarro expresses techniques of painting both the effects of light and its absence. To highlight the spring day, Pissarro uses earth tones of blue, green, and brown to acknowledge the prosperous season.

Out of the fourteen paintings, Pissarro only depicted one night scene, *Boulevard Montmartre Night Effect* (1897) (Figure 4). Art historian Meir Ronnen, analyzed this specific painting and stated that: “Pissarro had performed an old trick beloved of Gauguin and others: he had mixed a little black into every color employed. There wasn't a scrap of pure color in the entire painting”²⁵ adding to the theme of utilizing one color to create a harmonious composition of tone. In this night scene there is no natural light source, only artificial light. Therefore, it challenged Pissarro to be able to capture how artificial light changed the view of subjects. On the major boulevard, various lights would be used “including electric street lamps as well as gaslights and oil-burning lamps” all of which Pissarro interpreted in a different way on the canvas as they each gave off a unique glow.²⁶

In total, Pissarro painted seven different series with the motif of the city of Paris. “Pissarro painted more cityscapes than any other major Impressionist and, as such, made the most sustained contribution to urban view painting by any great artist since the death of Canaletto in 1768.”²⁷ Although the Boulevard Montmartre series is considered the “most

²⁵ Ronnen.

²⁶ “Boulevard Montmartre: ImpressionistArts”.

²⁷ Maloon, 185.

systematic, homogeneous, focused, and most rapidly achieved series”, Pissarro continued to paint this motif. During the winter months of 1897-1898, he booked another hotel room at the Grand Hôtel du Louvre which had a view of the Avenue de l’Opéra where Pissarro could complete another series dedicated to capturing the effects of weather on a Parisian boulevards with buildings on either sides diminishing into the horizon. *Avenue de l’Opera - Effect of Snow* (1898) (figure 5) beautifully captures a winter day with an icy sky and snow tracks on the ground from the carriages. Pinks and blues are used to capture the essence of a frosty atmosphere; although it would feel dreary to be in, Pissarro paints the scene so pleasingly. *Avenue de l’Opera-Morning Sunshine* (1898) (figure 6) employs pastel shades of blue, orange, and pink to alter the boulevard into a happier and charming atmosphere. There is an overall sense of bliss where the viewer can feel the spring sunshine. Light covers the entire scene and darker shades are only used for minute details. The Avenue de l’Opera and Boulevard Montmartre both chronicle the effects of weather and time over the changing of the seasons. In a technically strategic manner Pissarro illustrates beautifully realistic scenes that additionally radiate the mood of the specific environmental condition. It would only be a shame to paint the city in just one way, to see them all and their differences is a gift that Pissarro’s skill provides.

The Boulevard Montmartre series relied on building tonal relationships of color and the knowledge of the lighting placement to answer Pissarro’s question of how to illustrate Paris under different weather conditions and times of day. With the goal of augmenting harmony throughout the composition, the brush of Pissarro could not have executed it any better. His technical skills alongside an appreciation for nature allows Pissarro to see the light and color the world naturally gives and paint it verbatim. His renderings become both realistic and dreamlike,

a world that the viewer wants to step into. Installing oneself in the middle of the Paris street becomes no longer impossible.

Illustrations



Figure 1. Camille Pissarro, *Boulevard Montmartre Winter Morning*, 1897, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 32 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City



Figure 2. Camille Pissarro, *Boulevard Montmartre Afternoon Sunshine*, 1897, oil on canvas, 74 x 92.8 cm., Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia



Figure 3. Camille Pissarro, *Boulevard Montmartre Spring*, 1897, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm., The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

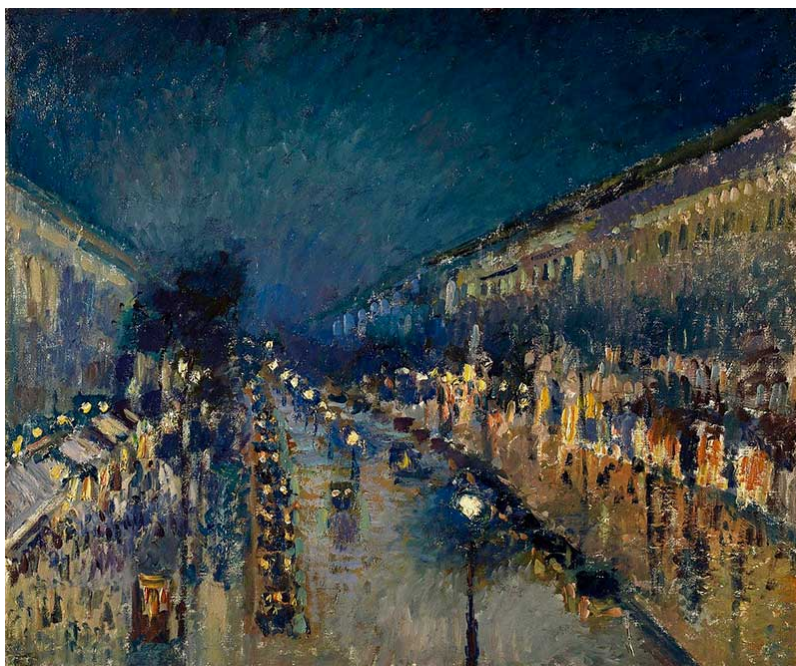


Figure 4. Camille Pissarro, *Boulevard Montmartre Night Effect*, 1897, oil on canvas, 53.3 x 64.8 cm., The National Gallery, London



Figure 5. Camille Pissarro, *Avenue de l'Opera - Effect of Snow*, 1898, oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm., Private Collection



Figure 5. Camille Pissarro, *Avenue de l'Opera - Morning Sunshine*, 1898, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm., Private Collection

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