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PISSARRO'S *YOUNG WOMAN MENDING*

Although the Art Institute possesses an unrivalled collection of French Impressionist paintings, with especially notable groups by Monet and Renoir, the representation of Camille Pissarro has until recently been relatively unimportant. Mrs. Leigh B. Block's gift of a figure piece, *Young Woman Mending*, of 1895 fills admirably the need of a characteristic late work. Rosa, a maid in the Pissarro household, was the model for this compact, solidly modeled figure of a peasant girl who concentrates unself-consciously on her mending. Pissarro, unlike many other French artists who either idealized or sentimentalized peasant types, depicted his models honestly and unaffectedly.

In a letter to his son, Lucien, dated December 4, 1895, Pissarro wrote: "I am doing several figures from our Rosa; they are developing with more sureness; I am quite pleased with a canvas of about 25x21 inches, *Peasant Girl Selling at a Market*, which is closely related to my figures of 1882-83, with a little more freshness." In the same letter, he had complained that he was having difficulty finishing some large figure paintings which he was leaving around his studio waiting for a final moment of inspiration. As a change he turned to smaller canvases and in the studies of Rosa, such as the one under discussion, felt satisfaction and a sense of achievement.

Although Pissarro had lived in France during most of his life since the age of twelve, he had been born in the Danish West Indies, a fact which he regarded as a handicap since he was sometimes excluded from French exhibitions. He is, nevertheless, a major figure in the group who in the 1870s revolted against established traditions. He did not, however, consider that he was a revolutionary but felt rather that he and the other Impressionists were merely adding new facets to the great tradition of French painting. As a young

man he had been encouraged by Corot to frequent the ateliers of official painters but he preferred to observe nature and people in natural settings. Both Corot and Courbet influenced his work of the sixties, but through Manet and the group which he encountered at the Café Guerbois he learned to lighten his palette. While in London, when he fled from the German invasion of 1871, he was profoundly impressed by the sunburst coloring of the work of Turner and the luminous paintings of Constable. On returning to France he became firmly associated with the group who were soon to be known as the Impressionists and exhibited with them in their first showing in 1874. Although he continued to show with this group, he had many differences of opinion with them as he did not share Monet's views about dissolving form in light. In 1885 Pissarro met Seurat and was influenced to some extent by his style but finding this technique too arduous, returned to his earlier manner.

Increasing sales from more frequent exhibitions resulted in Pissarro's attaining financial security during his final years. *Young Woman Mending* is a product of this period when he was no longer harrassed by the problems of bringing up seven children on a meager income. He painted surrounding areas of the city which delighted him, did numerous scenes of the streets and squares of Paris, but perhaps his most carefully considered canvases were the figure pieces. From Eragny in 1895 he wrote Lucien that he was working steadily at his figure paintings, a subject which he obviously took with great seriousness.

While Pissarro remained always an Impressionist in that he made use of the comma brush stroke, unmixed colors and suffused lighting, he achieved, nevertheless, within this format a sense of firm modeling and well-rounded form. This interest in structure was due

Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), *Young Woman Mending*. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ in., signed and dated at lower left: C. Pissarro 1895. Accession number 59.636, Gift of Mrs. Leigh B. Block.



to some extent to his admiration for Cézanne, that “refined savage” as he called him, whose work he found strange and disconcerting, unfinished though much worked on, yet despite this was “grandiose” and of “irreproachable perfection.” Pissarro was of course mindful of the fact that he had greatly influenced Cézanne when they worked together at Pontoise in the early seventies but subsequently they developed along quite different lines. In contrast to Cézanne’s thinly applied paint, Pissarro uses a fairly heavy impasto. His mauve stripes in Rosa’s blouse are actually a combination of purple, gray and white strokes which at a short distance melt into a muted mauve tone. Her reddish hair is red-brown, pink and gray, while her ruddy complexion is achieved by overlaying strokes of deep rose on a pale pink base. This overall grainy effect gives a rich texture while uniformly modulated colors result in a tonal unity. Wide stripes

on the table cover and narrower stripes in the blouse constitute a theme around which the design of the painting is constructed. The solidly modeled head with glowing color, placed off-center at the upper left, becomes the dominant motif within the framework of this well-constructed design. More significant than considerations of color, design or technique is the deep concentration of the figure which results in a strong psychological intensity. Pissarro’s deep interest in humanity is reflected in the honesty and integrity of his figure compositions among which *Young Woman Mending* is a vital and enduring example.

FREDERICK A. SWEET

REFERENCES: *Camille Pissarro, son art, son oeuvre*, edited by Paul Rosenberg (Paris, 1939), no. 934, p. 210, ill. Pl. 189; Camille Pissarro, *Letters to his Son Lucien*, edited by John Rewald (New York c1943), p. 277

PEVSNER, continued from page 2

tween them. It is of interest that before the first world war people emerged from the world of Russia who were passionate about reality, space, and time. There is in the intensity of this passion something which is curiously and ineluctably romantic, and I believe it is this romantic intensity which gives the work of Pevsner its power, just as the clarity of his forms gives his work its logical beauty.

JOHN MAXON

NOTES

¹ Antoine Pevsner was born in Orel, Russia, in

1886. He studied in Kiev and Leningrad. He worked in Paris in 1911, and from 1913 through 1914; he was in Norway from 1914 through 1917. From 1917 through 1922 he lived in Moscow, and since 1923 he has lived in Paris.

² In 1920

³ This is nicely summarized by Herbert Read in his introduction to Ruth Olson’s and Abraham Chanin’s *Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner*, New York (Museum of Modern Art), 1948, p. 10, and in Andrew Ritchie’s *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*, New York, n.d., p. 44.