“It is absurd to look for perfection.”
Camille Pissarro

In this ebook, I take a closer look at his interesting life and art of Camille Pissarro. His work is colorful, adventurous, and played a pivotal role in the development and popularity of Impressionism. However, he is often overshadowed by fellow artist and friend, Claude Monet.

Camille Pissarro, Rye, Pointoise, 1877
Here are some of the key facts and ideas about the life and art of Pissarro:

• His first teacher was artist Fritz Melbye, who mostly painted dramatic seascapes. It was Melbye who first encouraged Pissarro to pursue a career as a fine artist.

Camille Pissarro, Self-Portrait, c.1857-58
• Pissarro later studied under Gustave Courbet and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, who were both accomplished artists in their own rights. You can see the influence of these artists through Pissarro’s early work, which is much more restrained than the colorful depictions we know him for today. Pissarro also had ambitions to exhibit at the prestigious Salon exhibition in Paris, which notoriously favored academic painting styles.

Camille Pissarro, Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas, 1856

• 1859 was an important year for Pissarro. It was the first time he exhibited in the Salon (unfortunately, I have been unable to locate information on what work he exhibited). It was also the year he met Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne whilst studying at Académie Suisse. The three artists shared a disdain for the Salon’s preference in academic art and would end up playing pivotal roles in the development of Impressionism.

• Pissarro would later exhibit in the Salon des Refusés, which was established for the many artists who were rejected by the official Salon. The Salon des Refusés also paved the way for the first Impressionist exhibition.

• In the early 1870s, Pissarro and his family were forced to relocate to London due to the Franco-Prussian War. He would find most of his work destroyed when he returned to his home in France (some 1,500 works).
Despite the setback, he continued working and took part in every Impressionist exhibition from the first in 1874 to the last in 1886. Below is one of the five paintings he displayed at the first exhibition.

Camille Pissarro, *Hoarfrost, 1873*

- During the 1880s, Pissarro moved into Post-Impressionism, which he considered to be a “phase in the logical march of Impressionism”. During this time, he worked with artists Georges Seurat and Paul Signac who were exploring different approaches to painting, particularly to do with color. They started using a pointillism technique, which involves painting with small dabs of distinct color (rather than blended color), as shown in *Brick Factory Deepali in Eragny*.

Camille Pissarro, *Brick Factory Deepali in Eragny, 1888*
• Pissarro ended up leaving Post-Impressionism, explaining to a friend:

“Having tried this theory for four years and having then abandoned it ... I can no longer consider myself one of the neo-impressionists ... It was impossible to be true to my sensations and consequently to render life and movement, impossible to be faithful to the effects, so random and so admirable, of nature, impossible to give an individual character to my drawing, I had to give up.”

• He suffered from an eye condition during his later years which partially restricted him from painting outdoors. (What a frustrating predicament—to be an artist with compromised sight).

• He passed away in Paris on 13 November 1903 at the age of 73. His life had a profound influence on many other esteemed artists. Mary Cassatt said he was “such a teacher that he could have taught the stones to draw correctly.” Cézanne said “he was a father for me. A man to consult and a little like the good Lord.”

His family would go on to continue his legacy, with many of his children and grandchildren pursuing a life in the arts. His son Lucien, who adopted a similar Impressionist style from his father, described him as a “splendid teacher, never imposing his personality on his pupil.”

(Before you continue, take a moment to look at one of Pissarro’s final self-portraits above—an old man with a life of painting behind him. Now go back to one of his first self-portraits at the start of this post—a young man at the start of his journey. It is always interesting to compare self-portraits from different points in an artist’s life.)
We are lucky in the sense that much of Pissarro’s life is documented through his many letters to friends, family, and artists.

What better way to learn about how Pissarro’s worked and his general philosophies as an artist than from his own words. Below are a handful of extracts from his many letters which I think are particularly interesting, along with some brief commentary. If you have time after reading this post, I suggest you take a look through the many other resources provided at the end, as this is just a snippet of the information available.

**Pissarro on subject selection and the challenges of painting outdoors:**

“I am hard at work, at least I work as much as the weather permits. - I began a work the motif of which is the river bank in the direction of St. Paul’s Church. Looking towards Rouen I have before me all the houses on the quays lighted by the morning sun, in the background the stone bridge, to the left the island with its houses, factories, boats, launches, to the right a mass of pinnaces of all colors. Yesterday, not having the sun, I began another work on the same motif in grey weather, only I looked more to the right. I must leave you for my motif. I have a room on the street. I shall start on a view of the street in fog for it has been foggy every morning until eleven o’clock—noon. It should be interesting, the square in the fog, the tramways, the goings and comings.”

Letter from Pissarro to his son Lucien dated 11 October 1883

Painting outdoors comes with many challenges—the changing light, the subject moving, wind blowing, etc. As Pissarro explained above, a great solution to this is working on multiple paintings at the same time. When conditions change significantly, pick a different motif and start a new painting. You can always go back to an earlier painting when conditions are suitable again. For example, if you are painting a foggy landscape and the fog starts to fade, consider pausing and coming back when it is foggy again.
Pissarro on the importance of drawing:

“I recognize fully that you do not draw well, my dear Lucien. I told you any number of times that it is essential to have known forms in the eye and in the hand. It is only by drawing often, drawing everything, drawing incessantly, that one fine day you discover to your surprise that you have rendered something in its true character.”

Letter from Pissarro to his son Lucien dated 1883

You can see his proficiency in drawing through his paintings of architecture, like the two paintings in the next page. Do not be fooled by his painterly and almost chaotic brushwork. His fundamentals, including drawing, are strong; this allows him more
flexibility with his brushwork. From what I have read, he was largely self-taught in drawing, practicing from an early age.

Camille Pissarro, Place du Havre, Paris, 1893

Camille Pissarro, The Avenue De L’Opera, Paris, Sunlight, Winter Morning, 1898
Pissarro on the fear of judgment and his own worthiness as an artist:

“I have just concluded my series of paintings, I look at them constantly. I who made them often find them horrible. I understand them only at rare moments, when I have forgotten all about them, on days when I feel kindly disposed and indulgent to their poor maker. Sometimes I am horribly afraid to turn round canvases which I have piled against the wall; I am constantly afraid of finding monsters where I believed there were precious gems! Thus it does not astonish me that the critics in London relegate me to the lowest rank. Alas! I fear that they are only too justified! - However, at times I come across works of mine which are soundly done and really in my style, and at such moments I find great solace. But no more of that. Painting, art in general, enchants me. It is my life. What else matters?”

Letter from Pissarro dated 20 November 1883 (recipient unknown)

If you are ever lacking confidence, remember even great artists like Pissarro went through times of uncertainty and self-doubt. We tend to forget that they were working artists trying to make it on their own journey.

Camille Pissarro, View of Bazincourt, 1889
Pissarro on the benefits and compromises of pointillism:

“I think continually of some way of painting without the dot. I hope to achieve this but I have not been able to solve the problem of dividing the pure tone without harshness. How can one combine the purity and simplicity of the dot with the fullness, suppleness, liberty, spontaneity and freshness of sensation postulated by our impressionist art? This is the question which preoccupies me, for the dot is meager, lacking in body, diaphanous, more monotonous than simple, even in the Seurat’s, particularly in the Seurat’s [paintings]. I’m constantly pondering this question, I shall go to the Louvre to look at certain painters who are interesting from this point of view. Isn’t it senseless that there are no Turners [here].”

Letter from Pissarro to his son Lucien dated 6 September 1888

He touches on some interesting points about the limitations of our paints and how we see color. You see, the more we mix our paints, the less rich, vibrant, and brilliant the colors become (you will all be familiar with the “mud” which is left on the palette after a long session). The Post-Impressionists like Seurat were trying to side-step this limitation by painting with small dabs (or points) of distinct, unmixed color, thinking this would produce more brilliant colors than what you get from blending. But, as Pissarro points out, there are compromises when you only paint in small dabs of color.
Cézanne on Pissarro’s use of color:

“That is why, perhaps, all of us derive Pissarro. He had the good luck to be born in the West Indies, where he learned how to draw without a teacher. He told me all about it. In 1865 he was already cutting out black, bitumen, raw sienna and the ocher’s. That’s a fact. Never paint with anything but the three primary colours and their derivatives, he used to say me. Yes, he was the first Impressionist.”

Paul Cézanne

This explains the colorfulness of Pissarro’s work after 1865. On an interesting note, he painted a simple landscape on his palette below:

Camille Pissarro, Landscape Painted on Palette, c.1878

Pissarro on how he worked through a painting:

“Work at the same time upon sky, water, branches, ground, keeping everything going on an equal basis and unceasingly rework until you have got it. Paint generously and unhesitatingly, for it is best not to lose the first impression.”
This is how I imagine many of the Impressionists worked. The challenge of painting this way is keeping a sense of control; it can be very easy to slip from Impressionism into sloppiness.

Camille Pissarro, The Harvest, Pontoise, 1881
I will now take a closer look at some of Pissarro’s other paintings, starting with a simple landscape named *The Big Walnut at the Hermitage*.

It features fresh and spontaneous brushwork along with a pleasant analogous color scheme. Most of the painting is kept within a tight value range, which is typical of Impressionist works. Take note of all the different green tones used throughout the painting and how the greens get a touch warmer in the light.

**Tip:** Green is generally considered a cool color, but remember that color temperature is relative. You could have a cool green and a warm green when compared to each other.
In the painting below, I love the subtle color changes in the sky and distant land. This soft area is broken up by the abrupt tree scumbled over the top. Also, notice the contrast between rich, saturated colors in the foreground and light, weak colors in the background.

*Camille Pissarro, Louveciennes with Mont Valérien in the Background, 1870*

*Bank Holiday, Kew* depicts the busy streets filled with people and activity. Pissarro’s loose brushwork is particularly effective for this scene as it adds to the sense of movement and atmosphere. Also, notice the subtle color changes and directional strokes used for the paved ground—this is an example of creating interest in an otherwise flat and bland area (many beginners would simply paint the street surface a flat gray).

*Camille Pissarro, Bank Holiday, Kew, 1892*
Below is a demonstration of pointillism by Pissarro from his Post-Impressionism period. Notice the small dabs of distinct color—vivid yellows, greens, oranges, purples, blues. You can almost feel a vibration of color as your eyes dance around the painting.

*Camille Pissarro, Sunset at St. Charles, Eragny, 1891*

Pissarro found color even during the night. Deep blues are used for the sky and shadows, with dabs of vivid yellow and orange used for the lights.

*Camille Pissarro, The Boulevard Montmartre at Night, 1897*
The painting below is a beautiful demonstration of contrast and framing, with the shadowed foreground framing the high-key colors in the background. Notice how much color Pissarro used for the shadows.

Camille Pissarro, Chestnuts, 1873
Here are some of the key takeaways from this ebook:

• Do not be afraid to experiment with new styles and approaches to painting, as Pissarro did all throughout his life. If you always paint carefully and realistically, then try taking a more spontaneous approach for a few paintings, and vice versa.

• Connect with other likeminded artists. From reading the many letters from Pissarro, you can feel a strong sense of community he had with other artists.

• Make sure you have recording procedures in place for your artworks, particularly photos. It would be a shame if any of your paintings were lost or destroyed without record (like when Pissarro ended up losing around 1,500 of his works as a result of the Franco-Prussian War).

• If you are painting outdoors, you may want to consider working on several paintings at once. Once the conditions change significantly, start working on a different motif.

• If you want to paint well, make sure your drawing is up to par. As Pissarro put it “It is only by drawing often, drawing everything, drawing incessantly, that one fine day you discover to your surprise that you have rendered something in its true character.”

• Even the great masters we study and admire today went through times of uncertainty and self-doubt.