

Extract from Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro.

*The Impressionist and the City.*¹

Chapter 3: Paris: The Boulevard Montmartre. Perspective, Rows and Columns.

At the beginning of February 1897, having completed and sold his six small canvases representing 'snow effects on the Rues Saint-Lazare and Amsterdam,'² which 'paid for his monthly expenses'³ Pissarro returned to Eragny. These six paintings not only paid for his expenses, they paved the way for further series works: within days Pissarro was back in Paris 'to begin a series of Paris'.⁴ This was the group that would begin with *Boulevard Montmartre: Foggy Morning* and end with *Boulevard des Italiens: Morning, Sunlight*. Durand-Ruel had been seduced by the earlier group of six canvases and encouraged Pissarro to pursue this course, this time using larger formats and focusing on the boulevards rather than the intersection of streets in front of the Gare Saint-Lazare: 'I am returning to Paris on the tenth of this month, the day after tomorrow, to begin a series of Paris. I have booked a room in the Grand Hôtel de Russie, 1 Rue Drouot as from the tenth and I hope to paint about ten canvases there. Durand was very pleased with the small ones that I did – he advised me to do the boulevards, but larger of course.'⁵

The Boulevard Montmartre series constitutes the first fully fledged series of views of a Paris boulevard in Pissarro's *oeuvre*. Pissarro had come to Paris with the intention of completing a series; previously, in 1893 and in February 1897, he had been visiting the capital primarily to attend to other matters. The Boulevard Montmartre series was also the first Paris series to be commissioned from Pissarro by Durand-Ruel. Moreover, it appears to be the most systematic and rigorously

¹Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro. *The Impressionist and the City*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1992, pp. 59-60.

²J. Bailly-Herzberg. *Correspondence de Camille Pissarro*, vol. iv: 1895-1898, Paris, 1989, p. 121 (Paris, 3 February 1897; to Lucien Pissarro): 'des effets de neige des rues Sainte-Lazare et Amsterdam'.

³Pissarro sold all six, as a group, to Paul Durand-Ruel.

⁴Bailly-Herzberg 1989, p. 323 (Eragny par Gisors, 8 February 1897; to Georges Pissarro): 'pour commencer une série de Paris.'

⁵Bailly-Herzberg 1989, p. 323 (Eragny par Gisor. 8 February 1897; to Georges Pissarro): 'Je retourne à Paris le 10 de ce mois, après demain, pour commencer une série de Paris. J'ai arrêté une chambre au Grand Hôtel de Russie, 1 rue Drouot à partir du 10, j'espère y faire une dizaine de toiles. Les petites que j'ai faites ont plu beaucoup à Durand, il m'a conseillé d'en faire des boulevards, mais grandes bien entendu.'

composed of all Pissarro's series. The perspective is strictly defined by the plunging, inverted 'V' of the Boulevard Montmartre, firmly delineated laterally by two rows of trees and houses on each side of the road, and thrusting eastward towards the Porte Saint-Denis. Turning slightly, he could also observe the Boulevard des Italiens. This is how Pissarro described his vista: 'I can see the lines of the boulevards almost right up to the Porte Saint-Denis, or certainly up to the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle.'⁶

Pissarro painted fourteen views of the Boulevard Montmartre, which he could see to the left of the window of his spacious hotel room, plus two large, 'terribly difficult views' of the Boulevard des Italiens: *Boulevard des Italiens: Morning, Sunlight* and *Boulevard des Italiens: Afternoon*. The latter two constitute exceptions, in that, here, Pissarro looked to his right; these are the only views among this group for which Pissarro shifted his vantage point: 'I have begun my series of Boulevards. I have a splendid motif which I am going to explore under all possible effects, to my left; I have another motif, which is terribly difficult: almost as the crow flies, looking over the carriages, buses and people milling about between the large trees and big houses which I have to set up right – it's tricky ... it goes without saying that I must solve it all the same.'⁷

On 12 February, Pissarro announced to Georges, 'I have started my series of Boulevards', and two months and four days later, he was able to tell Lucien, 'I have packed up my sixteen canvases to be sent to Eragny.'⁸ As soon as this series was finished, and by now having completed two series within less than four months, Pissarro was already thinking about a different motif for another series: 'I am going to look for a place to work near the embankment this autumn, perhaps near the Luxembourg Gardens.'⁹ It is fascinating to notice that Pissarro, having just

⁶ Baily-Herzberg 1989, p. 324 (Eragny-Baziucourt par Gisors, 8 February 1897; to Lucien Pissarro): 'Je vois toute l'enfilade des boulevards jusqu'à la porte Saint-Denis presque, dans tous les cas jusqu'au boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle'

⁷ Baily-Herzberg 1989, 325 (Paris, 13 February, 1897; to Georges Pissarro): 'j'ai commence ma série des *Boulevards*, j'ai un motif épatant qu'il va falloir interpréter par tous les effets possibles, à ma gauche, j'ai un autre motif mais qui est terriblement difficile, c'est presque à vol doiseau, des voitures, des omnibus, des personnages entre de grands arbres, de grandes maisons qu'il faut mettre d'aplomb, c'est roide! ... il n'y a pas à dire, il faut que je m'en tire quand même.'

⁸ Baily-Herzberg 1989, p. 347 (Paris, 17 April 1897; to Lucien Pissarro): 'Je fais mes paquets pour expédier mes seize Toiles à Eragny'.

⁹ Baily-Herzberg 1989, p 347 (Paris, 17 April 1897; to Lucien Pissarro): 'Je vais aller à la recherche d'un endroit pour travailler cet automne aux quais; peut-être pres du jardin du Luxembourg.'

completed his first systematic Paris series, was already contemplating a series whose execution was, in fact, to be begun, only to be forestalled by his death in 1903 – the *quais* of Paris.

The Boulevard Montmartre series uses variations in canvas size and explores so fully changes in season, light and weather, that it would seem that the artist was motivated in this series by a desire to exhaust the pictorial resources offered by all the effects. As with all the series, the formats of the canvases vary. Here Pissarro used four formats: mainly sizes 15, 25 and 30, and then one canvas of size 8 (*Boulevard Montmartre: Spring*). The change of seasons and the contrast between winter and spring records the period of creation of the series which spanned the passage from winter (*Boulevard Montmartre: Foggy Morning*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Winter Morning*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Morning*, *Grey Weather*, *Boulevard Montmartre*) to spring (*Boulevard Montmartre: Spring*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Spring*). The change of light according to the progression of the day was also of sustained interest to Pissarro in the elaboration of this series. Morning is represented in *Boulevard Montmartre: Foggy Morning*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Winter Morning*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Morning*, *Grey Weather*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Morning*, *Sunlight and Mist*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Spring*, *Boulevard Montmartre*, *Boulevard des Italiens: Morning*, *Sunlight*. Noon features in *Boulevard Montmartre: Spring*, and afternoon in *Boulevard Montmartre: Afternoon*, *Sunshine*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Rainy Weather*, *Afternoon*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Sunset*, *Shrove Tuesday*, *Sunset*, *Boulevard Montmartre*. The only representation of night in Pissarro's series work occurs in *Boulevard Montmartre: Night*. Likewise, the weather conditions are recorded in all their various guises. These include: mist/fog (*Boulevard Montmartre: Foggy Morning*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Morning*, *Sunlight and Mist*); rain (*Boulevard Montmartre: Rainy Weather*, *Afternoon*, *Boulevard Montmartre* (note the umbrellas); grey weather (or after-rain) (*Boulevard Montmartre: Morning*, *Grey Weather*); sunshine (*Boulevard Montmartre: Afternoon Sunshine*, *Shrove-Tuesday*, *Sunset*, *Boulevard Montmartre*, *Boulevard des Italiens: Morning*, *Sunlight*, *Boulevard Montmartre: Spring*).

Finally, as in the Gare Saint-Lazare series, the human element appears to be in the foreground of the artist's pictorial concern, as, for example, with the crowds of *Boulevard Montmartre: Shrove Tuesday* and *Shrove-Tuesday, Sunset*, *Boulevard Montmartre*, as well as the ceaseless movement to-and-fro of carriages and pedestrians.

... Several general observations can ... be made ... Pissarro on the whole seems to have kept the larger formats for 'special effects': *Boulevard des Italiens: Morning, Sunlight* and *Boulevard des Italiens: Afternoon* depict the Boulevard des Italiens, the 'terribly difficult' motif; *Boulevard Montmartre: Shrove Tuesday* and *Shrove-Tuesday on the Boulevards* show the Shrove Tuesday procession; and *Boulevard Montmartre: Spring* represents his long-awaited spring effect. His recordings of late winter effects were executed mostly on standard formats, with two major exceptions where a larger format was employed, *Boulevard Montmartre: Morning, Grey Weather, Boulevard Montmartre: Morning, Sunlight and Mist*. The considerable variation of light and weather effects suggests that Pissarro was working all day. This is confirmed by his comment to his doctor: 'Every morning I am at my observation post until twelve noon and even until half past twelve, and in the afternoons from two until half past five.'¹⁰

As his most systematic and homogeneous compositions, and his most clearly focused series, as well as one of his most rapidly achieved, the Boulevard Montmartre series addresses elementary issues inherent in serial procedures. While representing a single motif seen under different combinations of light, weather and seasonal change, Pissarro's approach to this series was capable of producing an infinite number of possibilities. The sixteen views he brought back to Eragny can represent only a superb fragment.

¹⁰ Bailly-Herzberg 1989, p 347 (Paris, 13 February 1897; to Dr. Parenteau): 'je suis tous les matins à mon poste d'observation jusque'à midi et même midi et demie, et l'après-midi de deux à cinq heures et demie'.