

## **Extracts from Nathalia Brodskaya. *Pissarro*.<sup>1</sup>**

During the 1890s Pissarro was forced to interrupt his work in the countryside: due to an eye disease he could no longer work in the open air. In Paris he made a great many prints and painted fans – this brought in a bit of money. At the end of the century there was a craze for Japanese style - '*le japonisme*', which was one of the decorative elements of 'Art Nouveau' ornamentation. In 1893 all of Paris was swooning over the exhibition by the Japanese Painter Hiroshige. ...

... In the 1890s Pissarro ... found a way to reconcile his preference for open-air painting with his doctors' prohibitions: he would rent a room somewhere, on as high a floor as possible, preferably an attic, from which a magnificent panorama of Paris could be seen ...

Clearly it was impossible to discern details, but the painter could detect the pulse of Paris in its continuously animated streets, He painted close to the window, in the same manner as in Rouen or the open air of the countryside. He began and completed his landscape in just one session, like in the outdoors, and all the while his eyes were protected from exposure to the wind. He had previously painted isolated urban views on occasion: *Le Boulevard Rochechouart (Boulevard Rochechouart)* in 1878, and a snowy effect in *Les Boulevards Extérieurs (The Outer Boulevards)*, also from 1878. Now he painted Rue Saint-Lazare. Trains starting out from Éragny arrived at Saint Lazare station, and Pissarro usually entered the city by this route. In 1893 he settled in to the Hôtel Garnier on Rue Saint-Lazare. He painted four views of this street from the hotel window that were the start of his large series of Parisian landscapes. Next came an opportunity of a sort he could only have dreamt of: 'I'm leaving again on the tenth of the month, for Paris again, this time to do a series there of the Boulevard des Italiens,' he wrote to his son from Eragny in February 1897. 'I've decided on a spacious room at the Grand Hôtel de Russie, 1 Rue Drouot, from where I can see the

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<sup>1</sup> Nathalia Brodskaya. *Pissarro*, Parkstone International.

whole succession of boulevards almost all the way to Porte Saint- Denis, or as far as Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, anyway'.<sup>2</sup>

From this window he began to paint the long ribbon of broad boulevards that follow one upon another, in different weathers, in different situations, and at different times of the day. He wanted to see the crowds on holiday from above, which would introduce a new rhythm and new colour into the landscape. 'Here I am, all settled in and covering some large canvases,' he wrote a few days later. 'I'm going to try to prepare one or two in order to do the crowds on the day of Mardi Gras. I don't know yet what will happen: I truly hope the streamers don't bother me.'<sup>3</sup> Pissarro would prepare a canvas with the perspective of the boulevard, then paint it during the moment he wished to set down on this canvas, He painted a total of fifteen variations using Boulevard Montmartre.<sup>4</sup> Certain canvases were of the everyday boulevard, on workdays, with the vehicles coming and going, while on the sidewalks the dark stream of unhurried pedestrians flowed by (*Boulevard Montmartre. Soleil Aprils-Midi [Boulevard Montmartre. Sun in the Afternoon]*, 1897, St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum). In others, this same boulevard is flooded with a stream of bright colours: it is the Carnival celebration going by (*Boulevard Montmartre, Mardi-Gras*, 1897, Los Angeles, Armand Hammer Collection), 'I have a large number of things in progress, On Mardi-Gras I did the boulevards with the crowds and the Boeuf-Gras parade, with the sun's effects on the streamers and the trees, and the crowds in the shadow'.<sup>5</sup>

In this series Pissarro continued and elaborated on the image of the new Paris of their time, which Monet had begun in his *Boulevard des Capucines* (1873, Moscow,

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<sup>2</sup> Andrea P. A. Belloli (ed.). *A Day in the country : Impressionism and the French landscape*, New York: Abrams, 1984, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> Belloli, 1984: 204.

<sup>4</sup> Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro count 14 of *Boulevard Montmartre* with a further 2 of the *Boulevard des Italiens.*, in *The Impressionist and the City*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Belloli, 1984: 204.

Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts). He switched hotels and switched apartments, but his motif always remained Haussmann's Paris. 'I forgot to inform you that I have found a room in the Grand Hôtel du Louvre with a superb view of the Avenue de l'opera and the corner of the Place du Palais Royal! Very nice to do!' he wrote in 1897. 'It may not be very aesthetically pleasing, but I am delighted to be able to try and do the smaller streets of Paris which are commonly thought of as ugly, but which are so silvery, so luminous and so lively. It's entirely different from the boulevards. They're completely modern'.<sup>6</sup> He continued to work according to the same method, preparing the landscape's composition in advance. 'Here I am, I moved in yesterday,' he continued in the letter to his son. 'I have two large rooms and nice large windows from which I can see the Avenue de l'opera. The motif is very fine, very painterly. I have already begun two canvases'.<sup>7</sup> The point of view looking down on the city permitted Pissarro to use new composition methods, which the Impressionists had learned from the model of Japanese prints. If he painted a street that went on for a distance, the perspective remained a classical, linear one. If he was looking out from his attic at the Théâtre Français, it would spread out over the canvas on one plane only, right up to its upper edge, leaving no space for the sky. The square is sprinkled with little figures of men and women, as is sometimes the case in Pieter Breughel's compositions. Though, in a Pissarro, these figures are most often done with two or three touches of paint, as if carelessly applied to the canvas, each of them precisely renders the characteristic movement of a pedestrian (*La Place du Théâtre Français, Paris*, 1898, Los Angeles, County Museum of Art), His pedestrians swarm through the square and its vicinity, running to cross the streets, mounting the public transports, From high above it Pissarro reproduced the city's circulation and rhythm with the same sensitivity Monet demonstrated for capturing atmospheric changes. After

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<sup>6</sup> Belloli, 1984: 206.

<sup>7</sup> Belloli, 1984: 206.

Monet's series of 'Stations' and 'Rouen Cathedrals', Pissarro's urban series finally appeared in the exhibitions: twelve '*Passages [Alleys]*' and seven or eight '*Boulevards*.' At the dawn of the twentieth century Pissarro painted the Tuileries Gardens, from an attic as always. In one of these canvases, behind the garden and the Seine, the Gare d'Orsay station can be seen, still under construction (1900, St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, Private German Collections), He was not satisfied with the works of this period. He wrote to Claude Monet that those who were praising his landscapes of the Tuileries Gardens were being too indulgent towards him: 'I'm not satisfied with it. I haven't worked much. I'm battling old age',<sup>8</sup> He was pleased to have found a good workplace, near the Pont-Neuf with a magnificent view. ...

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<sup>8</sup> Lionello Venturi, *Les Archives de l'impressionisme*, Paris: Durand-Ruel, 1936, vol. 2, p. 340.