

‘Looking and listening continue to improve with experience.’

– Sargy Mann

An Approximate Landscape

by Kathryn Allan

Snowy landscape at Éragny with an apple tree, c.1895

Camille Pissarro (1830-1903)

Oil on canvas, 38.2 x 46.2 cm

The Fitzwilliam Museum

<https://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/2864>

See also Catalogue at end for author photographs of works discussed.

In attempting to write in June about a snowscape, there is, perhaps, some anachronism: the blankness of a wintry scene – the lull of snow, its visual censorship, its hush – is contrary to the abundance and noise of mid-year. Would Monet's *The Water-Lily Pond* (1899, National Gallery) – willows alert in their verdancy despite weeping, the flatness of canvas denied by blooms as far as the eye can see, a living, claustrophobic surface – not provide a more topical study? Perhaps, though, it is when picture and spectator come into temporal opposition – winter viewed in summer, for example – that a painting's agency can be activated, and its verisimilitude tested, to greater effect. I view Pissarro's *Snowy landscape at Éragny with an apple tree*, in the collection of the University of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum, on 21 June: the summer solstice seems a fitting date on which to be chilled by paint.

In this essay I argue for the stratagems of approximation, laconism and a scientific application of colour as methods used by Pissarro to achieve an impression of landscape. I also explore the painting's meteorological subject matter as technique.

How far in this visual shorthand will the temperature drop?

Approximation

The scene is a snowscape painted from Éragny-sur-Epte, Pissarro's village home in northwestern France from 1884 until his death in 1903. The image comprises the titular apple tree (and by extension, one assumes, some other apple trees) with a view of the village of Bazincourt-sur-

Epte behind. Harrison and Whiteley (2022, p.29) tell us, 'Pissarro...found in the garden, the orchard and the views beyond an endless source of the 'ordinary' scenes he chose to paint'. Yet aside from the hexagonal spire of Bazincourt's church being suggested on the horizon, the scene is an approximation. Stubby, taut brush marks and scratches in violet and purple, taupe and turquoise, stand in for the protrusion of grass through snow, figure-like almost in their anonymous, oblique procession through the painting's foreground. A dark, ribbon-like twist of pigment gives the central apple tree an ephemeral trunk, with calligraphic licks and curls denoting branches, limbs and twigs. Other trees are distilled further in their renderings, that on the right little more than a ghostly trident. The snow-covered ground is similarly lacking exactitude and identity, swathes of non-descript sullied white – a dragged brushstroke here, a splodge and smudge there – and wave-like, ice-blue undulations giving trees an undeserved buoyancy whilst standing in for local hillside. The Éragny-ness of Éragny is snowed under. And then in the background, small, tessellated tiles of colour indicate buildings, a kind of painted metaphor for the cheek by jowl parochial closeness of village life. But again, emblematic rather than delineative.

Pissarro's palette, too, is approximate: turquoise is both trunk and twig, building and year of creation; purples, intense here, diluted there, are deployed almost frantically throughout. The blaze of peach overhead – his winter sun – withers to a non-descript grey, the top third of the canvas scuffed with impressionistic churns. This is landscape painting that in its visual conjecture – *an* apple tree but not *the* apple tree, *some* snow but not *that* snow – circumvents a specific topography. It doesn't place us on the Éragny hillside, rather it gives us an impression of being on a hillside looking at a church-containing village in winter. Is that my breath I can see?

Laconism

As well as being approximate, this is also a sparse image. Detail is withheld, akin to the quick glance or the unholdable memory. To give us this fleeting impression, Pissarro is deliberately visually laconic: the painting's few iconographical elements are briefly described and information

that might have been included is purposefully missing. Indeed, it has something of the abbreviation and velocity of his contemporaneous monotypes. We have a snow-covered hillside (the white tells us so), six wispy trees and a village implied in the background. The brittleness and wetness of snow-laden grass, the crunch and sog of it, is tacit. The blanched echo of branch, limb and twig of the post-snowfall tree is assumed not painted. A Bazincourt resident knows he lives in the village but cannot discern his house from this visual account; more, you and I remember living there too. In being laconic, Pissarro gives us a *sensation* of winter – he connects us, apperceptively, to our own winterings (physical, psychological) – and a feeling of home. The economy of this quotidian scene grants us this room. Gombrich in *Art & Illusion* (1991, p.169) says more:

...Impressionism demanded more than a reading of brushstrokes...It is without any support from structure that the beholder must mobilize his memory of the visible world and project it into the mosaic of strokes and dabs on the canvas before him...The image, it might be said, has no firm anchorage on the canvas – it is only ‘conjured up’ in our minds.

Whilst the image is an impression, sending out a feeling towards us, we impress upon it (Gombrich’s projection). On this mental sharing, Berger (2021, p.260) posits that the spectator is passive. He writes, ‘You cannot enter an Impressionist painting; instead it extracts your memories.’ There is something two-way happening, I think. Pissarro, in his brevity here, is being transactional: a feeling in exchange for a projection; an impression as a quid pro quo for your recollection.

I lean in, closer. Colder.

A scientific application of colour

Science helped Pissarro determine his way of seeing for himself – an anarchist and anarchic vision; at the same time, it enabled him to produce an art which was visibly the opposite of the art he was against. (Smith, 1995, p.134)

In the Éragny landscape riotous purples, for they protest across most of the painting's surface, complement the yellow-tinged peach of Pissarro's low winter sun, each intensifying the other's hue – cover the sun and this is a drier scene, purples no longer pop – and turquoises activate taupes and vice versa (the blue and orange complement). In the same way that Pissarro sympathised aesthetically and politically with the chromatically-varied peasant dress – ‘the refusal of colour to conform to those dull “bourgeois” norms’ (ibid., p.127) – here, too, the artist can be said to be scientifically employing and combining colour for its aesthetic and political properties, and in so doing he uses colour as a form of metaphor and resistance. Éragny, dull? With violaceous trees and sea-green rooftops, this is landscape as prismatic anarchy, Monet's ‘violettomania’ inflicting Pissarro also, perhaps (see Monet's 1886 [Springtime](#), The Fitzwilliam Museum). But this is a snowscape: can the metonymical white blanket be colourful? Pissarro, as Harrison and Whiteley (*op. cit.*, p.206) remind us, ‘consistently maintained that winter was a more colourful time of year than summer.’ Maybe, too, there are some 17th century learnings in those purples:

The Impressionist artists could see how Vermeer had used blue and purple in the shadows...so that he understood how colour operated in the same way the Impressionists would. (Perspective, 2023)

And a palette prescient of what was to come: listen, for example, to the painter Jenny Saville explain how the Impressionist-inspired Cy Twombly created ‘nature on a canvas’, the black-barked oak tree becoming a ‘misty purple’ when viewed on a hill from a distance (Menil Collection, 2024). In applying colour scientifically – employing complementaries, making colour a corollary of light, colouring according to distance – we receive a sensation, our eye there with Pissarro's.

Subject matter as technique

In noting an eschewal by the Impressionists of ‘the midday sun’, Thomson (2000, pp.156-159)

writes about the scenic choices made for preferable light effects:

They became more interested in the diffuse effects of light when it is broken by cloud or falls on reflective or absorbent surfaces...they savoured the softening or erasing of contours produced by fog and snow.

In choosing to depict a winter landscape, Pissarro utilises the highly reflective property of snow to paint a picture of light: meteorological subject matter as a kind of technique, with emollient effect. His edges are rounded (Thomson's 'softening') and the perimeters of his forms are blurred, in places obliterated such that shapes deliquesce in front of us (see, for example, the patch of violet on the painting's righthand side). In pursuing an interest in light's diffusion via his Éragny snowscape, Pissarro gives us a part-erased image – an impression, something that once was – but, in its lightness, a moment of clarity also. Like the writer Ali Smith, perhaps Pissarro too thought of winter as the season of the year's quartet offering the greatest opportunity for lucidity: 'Winter, [Smith] thinks, is a place where you can see really clearly...' (Laing, 2020, p.167).

It's June and I'm cold. In a warm Cambridge gallery on the summer solstice, a little painting of a view of a French village in winter has spoken hypothetically: it has, without any literalness, chilled me.

Julian Bell (2017, p.100) on the 'quality of snatched vision' in another Impressionist's painting – Degas' [*At the Café*](#) (c.1877, The Fitzwilliam Museum) – writes, '[it] doesn't *tell* a sad story: it overhears one.' In that sense – the *sense* of sense-ation, its ears and eyes – Pissarro's scene doesn't tell the story of his wintering village: it glimpses one of its still images.

In winter, and after the thaw, an impression remains.

This essay was submitted for the University of Oxford's The Impressionists: Painting Modern Life course in 2024.

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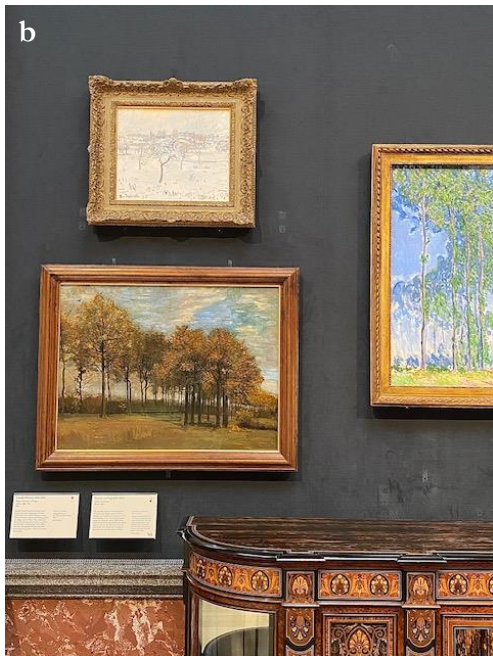
Catalogue (author photographs – The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)



a

a. *Snowy landscape at Éragny with an apple tree* (detail), c.1895
Camille Pissarro (1830-1903)
Oil on canvas, 38.2 x 46.2 cm

b. (clockwise from top left): The seasons, gathered – Pissarro's *Snowy landscape at Éragny with an apple tree*, Monet's 1891 *Poplars* (detail, oil on canvas), Van Gogh's c.1885 *Autumn Landscape* (oil on canvas laid on panel)
The side cabinet is c.1871-75, design attributed to Owen Jones (1809-1874) made by Jackson and Graham, London



b



c

c. *Au Café*, 1875
Edgar Degas (1834-1917)
Oil on canvas, 65.7 x 54.6 cm
d. Eavesdropping? *Au Café* (detail)



d



e

e. *Springtime* (f, g, detail), 1886
Claude Monet (1840-1926)
Oil on canvas, 64.8 x 80.6 cm
'I have finally discovered the true colour of the atmosphere. It's violet. Fresh air is violet.' Claude Monet became so fixated on the colour purple that he was described by critics as experiencing 'violettomania'. – exhibition label, The Fitzwilliam Museum



f