

# *Camille Pissarro's Jewish Identity*

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**D**uring the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Jewish emigré artists converged on Paris. Some of them, Modigliani, Soutine, Chagall and Lipchitz, to mention four of the most outstanding, played central roles in avant-garde movements. These artists became active participants in the vibrant Parisian art scene, and substantially contributed to the innovative currents that changed the course of art history. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century France, however, only one Jewish artist maintained a pivotal position in the vanguard of his time. This distinction belongs to Camille Pissarro, who was one of the principal figures in the founding, development and dissemination of Impressionism.

Pissarro was a self-declared atheist and anarchist. Though of Jewish lineage, no references to his ancestry are to be found in his paintings. Nevertheless, the fact that he was born a Jew had an influence on the man and on the course of his life. This study attempts to bring together the scattered and fragmentary, direct and indirect allusions to Pissarro's Jewishness. It will further endeavor to ascertain what insights these yield (when viewed chronologically and contextually), about the identity of a Jewish artist in late 19<sup>th</sup> century France.

The outermost borders of Pissarro's biography were touched by two dramatic events that influenced his intellectual development and had significant effects on his life. Both events were related to his Jewish origins. An emphasis will, therefore, be placed here on the first and last decades of his life, when these events had a meaningful impact on his thinking process. In addition, some attention will also be given to exploring written texts, by Pissarro and his close associates, during times when his awareness of his origins was less acutely perceived. But first, it is worth reviewing a few salient points regarding the Jewish heritage to which Pissarro was heir.

### **Pissarro's Jewish Heritage**

Camille Pissarro was descended from a Spanish-Portuguese Jewish family whose history goes back hundreds of years. Jews arrived in Spain with the Romans already in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and prospered there as merchants. They continued to live there under the Visigoths, who invaded the Roman Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century controlled most of the Iberian Peninsula. When the Moslems conquered the area, the Jews persevered in their midst, as a tolerated minority. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, however, when the Christians, under the Catholic King and Queen Ferdinand and Isabella, completed the reconquest of Spain, the Inquisition was established to purge the country of heretics and the Jews were expelled. Some Jews fled to North Africa; others escaped to Portugal, only to be subjected to a blanket conversion a few years later. Many became *Marranos*; a name applied to Jews who had been forced to convert but continued to practice their religion in secret.

Camille's great grandfather, Pierre Rodrigues Alvares Pizarro, was a native of Braganza, a Portuguese medieval fortified city near the Spanish border. His son Joseph Gabriel (Camille's grandfather, born 1776) emigrated to Bordeaux, France at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> By the time Joseph Gabriel left Braganza, his family had been *Marranos* for some two hundred and fifty years, passing their religion down in secret for ten generations. This transmission of religious belief was often accomplished at great personal risk, as the Inquisition was ever vigilant in its search to root out misbelievers. The tenacious continuing of Jewish traditions, despite adverse conditions, would therefore have been a family characteristic. It is interesting to note that this quality of tenacity was reflected in Pissarro's personality. Once having determined his own ideology, he remained loyal to it throughout his life. One might say that passionate fidelity to an ideology – religious or political – ran in the Pissarro family.

The unusual conditions that existed in Bordeaux at the time of Pissarro's grandfather's immigration were probably at least partially responsible for his leaving his native town of Braganza and moving to the southern French city. To understand the milieu that he encountered in Bordeaux, and into which his son Frédéric (Pissarro's father) was born and grew up, it is necessary to have some understanding of the history of Bordeaux's Jewish community.<sup>2</sup>

The Jews had been expelled from France in 1306. However, in 1472 and 1474, Louis XI had issued two significant ordinances specific to the city of Bordeaux. These ordinances granted special privileges to foreigners and were intended to encourage enterprising individuals to settle there with an eye to enhancing the city's flagging commerce. It was this new situation that enticed

the Inquisition endangered *Marranos*, called in France *nouveaux Chrétiens* (New Christians) to settle in Bordeaux. Realizing the importance of this influx to the Bordeaux economy, Henri II issued in 1550 the *Lettre Patente*, which officially recognized and protected the *nouveaux Chrétiens* and accorded them the rights of privileged Frenchmen. Four years later, the Bordeaux parliament made the *Lettre Patente* official by passing the first protective ordinance prohibiting 'all residences regardless of status either to molest the *nouveaux Chrétiens* or to force them to leave the city.'<sup>3</sup> Understanding that their safety and privileges were dependent upon their usefulness to the crown and the city, the *nouveaux Chrétiens* strove to develop the commercial potential of Bordeaux while maintaining a low profile. Nevertheless, the community was intermittently threatened with eviction of certain of its ranks. Though tension was at times great, advances were also made. In 1615 the Portuguese merchants gained additional economic and political privileges. Throughout this time, however, the members of the community continued to live within the frame of Catholicism.

During the reign of Louis XIV a significant change took place. The Portuguese merchants slowly began to be referred to as Jews by the Crown. Their situation once again became precarious; by 1684 ninety-three Portuguese Jewish families considered unnecessary to France had received notice to depart within a month. The King's zeal in establishing one religion in France was not, of course, limited to the suppression of *nouveaux Chrétiens*. In 1685 he revoked the Edict of Nantes, forcing the large Huguenot (Protestant) population to emigrate or convert to Catholicism. France's economic development suffered greatly from the departure of large numbers of its commercial and industrial classes.

Eventually, however, for political and economic reason, Louis decided in 1700 to tax the *nouveaux Chrétiens* rather than expel them. It was clear by this time that the King considered them Jews and no longer found it necessary to pretend to accept their Christian camouflage. Under Louis XV the situation worsened. In 1722 the King ordered the wealth of the Portuguese merchants of Bordeaux inventoried and seized. He considered them Jews and therefore without privileges. However, the combination of their undeniable economic usefulness, their ability to pay large sums of money to the government, and the country's economic predicament eventually caused Louis XV to issue the *Lettres Patentes* of 1723. The *nouveaux Chrétiens* had their privileges of 1550 and 1656 again confirmed, but with a most important addition. They were now officially recognized as Jews.

This in fact reflected a process that had been underway for some time. Between 1690 and 1700 the *nouveaux Chrétiens* ceased to baptize their children and by 1711 they were no longer having their marriages blessed in Church. The definitive step came with the formal establishment of a Jewish communal structure. At first various charitable institutions were created. Then the Portuguese merchants established their own bakeries and kosher meat shops. A rabbi was hired. By 1711 all marriages had to have the approval of the syndic or his assistant. By the time of the *Lettres Patentes* of 1723 the *nouveaux Chrétiens* had established a tightly organized Jewish community able to oversee and discipline the activities of its members.

During the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the commerce of Bordeaux altered dramatically; exports rapidly began to exceed imports, and the population increased from 48,000 in 1710 to 108,000 by the end of the century. The Jewish population also increased threefold, from 500 in 1713 to 1500 on the eve of the French Revolution. Camille Pissarro's grandfather was among those who swelled the ranks of the burgeoning Jewish community. By then, the Jews had a strong communal organization and acting against it could be perilous.

A study of marriage contracts from between 1782 to 1784 (a decade before Camille's grandfather Joseph Gabriel would marry in Bordeaux), reveals some interesting facts. In the contracts involving Sephardic Jews marrying fellow Sephardim, 'some involve marriages within an extended family (for example cousins), all indicate professions of either tradesmen, merchants, brokers, bankers or *négociants*, and most reveal that family interests were strong in insuring economic stability.<sup>4</sup> This profile would precisely fit that of Camille Pissarro's father, Frédéric.

As they became manifestly Jewish and as a greater number of Portuguese emigrants arrived in Bordeaux, the activities and responsibilities of the community reinforced its moral as well as institutional commitment to Judaism. The Rabbi had a very limited role. It was the lay leaders whose authority prevailed. In the schools, the children were taught Hebrew grammar, an appreciation of the Psalms and Prophets, and a knowledge of the prayer book. The study of the Talmud was excluded. Thus, by rejecting the Talmud and Midrash and stressing the Bible as the exclusive source of divine truth, the Sephardim of Bordeaux developed a Judaism that was more compatible with 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism. The Sephardim stressed decorum, orderliness and tranquility; they prohibited the use of the rod, which they viewed as retarding the educational process; and most significantly, they introduced French and arithmetic into the revised curriculum of 1774.

The French Jews were the first in Europe to be emancipated. They were accorded citizenship in 1791. The Sephardic Jews, having arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, gradually casting off their Catholic guise by the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were the most highly acculturated of French Jewry. In Bordeaux, the absence of an intense religious environment, and the profound break with tradition represented by the inclusion of non-Jewish standards and values, helps explain the ease with which the Sephardim were to emerge as French citizens.

Joseph Gabriel (Camille's grandfather) was a listed member of the Sephardic Jewish community of Bordeaux.<sup>5</sup> He married Anne Félicité Petit in 1798. Anne Félicité had a brother, Isaac Petit, who had immigrated to the island of St. Thomas in the West Indies, then a possession of the Danish Crown. St. Thomas too provided trade opportunities within a relatively liberal openness that allowed for freedom of faith. In the small Jewish community of Bordeaux, family and business connections intertwined. Therefore, it was not unusual that when Isaac Petit died, the Pissaros sent one of their sons, Frédéric (Camille's father) to St. Thomas to help his maternal uncle's widow deal with her business matters.

Though she was his aunt by marriage and a number of years older, Rachel Petit and Frédéric Pissarro became involved. The ensuing scandal was of huge proportions, at least in local terms. On November 22, 1826 their marriage was announced in the *St. Thomas Times*, as having taken place 'by license from His Most Gracious Majesty King Frederik VI, and according to the Israelitish ritual'. A day later the leaders of the local Jewish community responded that the marriage was 'without the knowledge of the Rulers and Wardens of the synagogue, nor was the Ceremony performed according to the usual custom.'<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 1) It was the judgment of the elders of the synagogue that the Pissaros marriage contravened certain Jewish religious tenets. Joachim Pissarro, Camille's great-grandson, has described the intensity of the battle that ensued:

There followed a protracted and doubtless painful legal and emotional battle, lasting several years. The newlyweds insisted upon gaining proper recognition; the synagogue officials tried to thwart them. Both sides ...brought into the dispute every authority they could muster, be it the Danish government of St. Thomas or the Rabbinic authorities of Bordeaux, Paris, London, and Copenhagen, in order to gain support. The Pissaros tried desperately to legitimize their claim to be married.<sup>7</sup>

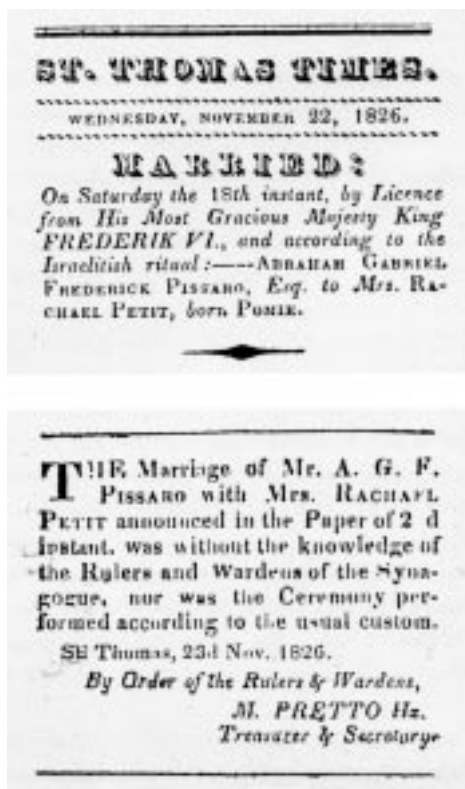


Fig. 1: Above: Announcement of the wedding of Camille Pissarro's parents in the *St. Thomas Tidende*, November 22, 1826. Below: Rejoinder of the Rulers and Wardens of the synagogue to the Pissarro's Wedding announcement, *St. Thomas Tidende*, November 23, 1826 Enid M. Baa Library, Von Scholten Collection

Frédéric Pissarro was only one generation removed from the *Marranos* who had been forced to practice their religion in secret. He had grown up in the tight-knit Jewish community of Bordeaux, where family and economic relationships were closely intertwined. He and his wife wanted to continue to live and be a part of the tiny Jewish community on St. Thomas. It is small wonder that they fought hard to have their marriage sanctioned by Jewish authorities.

### The Early Years

Their third child, Jacob Camille (born 1830) was, in fact, registered in the ledger of the synagogue of the town of Charlotte Amalie in St. Thomas (Fig. 2). Even so, their children would have been considered illegitimate. It was not until

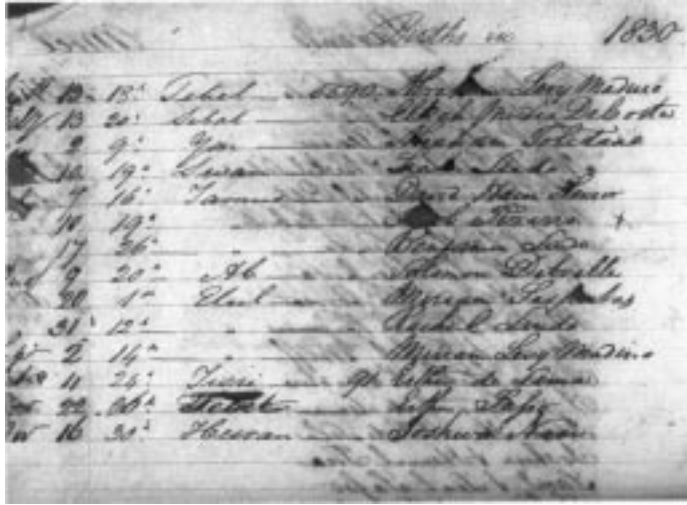


Fig. 2: Jacob Camille Pissarro's birth registration (line 6) in the ledger of the synagogue, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas

1833, seven years after their marriage, that the Elders of the synagogue finally relented and legitimized the Pissarro union. It would have been a humiliating experience and the stigma probably remained. Reflecting on the consequences of this unfortunate episode Joachim Pissarro speculates:

It seems, indeed, that Pissarro's anarchism and atheism both had deep psychological roots. When he was still a child, his parents, caught in the religious scandal surrounding their marriage, were probably no longer in a strong position to convincingly transmit to their children the principles of a tradition which had just rejected them....Knowing what had happened to their parents, it is not surprising that none of the children was very enthusiastic about the religion of their ancestors.

Pissarro decided to turn his back on religion altogether and immersed himself in authors who fortified his oppositional stance.<sup>8</sup>

Camille Pissarro's childhood and early school years on St. Thomas were, therefore, colored by the scandal surrounding the refusal of the Elders of the synagogue to recognize the marriage of his parents. These events, however, probably receded into the background when, in 1841 at age eleven, Camille was sent to the Pension Savary, a boarding school on the outskirts of Paris. It was important to his father that his sons learn French traditions and culture.<sup>9</sup> This would have been in keeping with the customs established in the Bordeaux

Jewish community into which Frédéric had been born. Camille followed a six-year traditional secular course of study. On occasion he visited his grandparents, Joseph and Anne-Félicité Pissarro. Upon graduating at age seventeen, Pissarro returned home to work in the family business. In his early twenties, however, he realized that being a well-paid clerk was not for him, and together with a painter friend, Fritz Melbye, he ran off to Venezuela in 1852. For the next two years, Pissarro pursued the life of an artist. In 1854, however, under pressure from the family he returned to St. Thomas for a short time, in return for a promise that his family would support him in his desired career.

In 1855 Pissarro returned to France where he remained, with the exception of short trips, for the rest of his life. At first he lived with his mother and two sisters, who had already taken up residence in Paris. By 1858, a monthly allowance provided by his parents permitted him to set up his own studio. Around this time, an interesting letter from his father Frédéric, written in the fall of 1859, gives us some insight into his family relations. Written on the eve of Yom Kippur, the letter was meant to remind Camille to spend the Day of Atonement with his parents. Although signed by his father, the request is made in his mother's name: 'Your mother asks me to write to you to come and have dinner with us today. Because this is the evening when we celebrate "la fête de Kipur" and on this solemn occasion the whole family should be together—and tomorrow not work, we should pass that day together.'<sup>10</sup> The fact that his father felt impelled to remind Camille of the meaning of this holiest of Jewish holidays indicated how far his son's estrangement from his religious traditions had advanced.

No letters before 1865 remain to us from Pissarro's voluminous correspondence, which fills five volumes. This means that the first letter that he preserved was written when he was already thirty-five years old. This first letter is also the only one in which traditional religious wording is employed, most likely because it announces the death of his father. In this letter, addressed to Eugene Petit in St. Thomas and dated January 31, 1865, he wrote: 'God is great, He took away what was dearest to us in the whole world; we have to bow and believe in His providence.'<sup>11</sup> Although he chose not to follow the religion of his ancestors, Pissarro was obviously well acquainted with its traditional, accepted format for expressing grief. The correct phrasing seems to have come easily to him. What is also interesting is that he chose this letter with which to begin the record of his correspondence. It is as if, confronted with the death of his father, he now felt the necessity, or perhaps the ability, to begin the chronicle of his own life.



Although Pissarro must have written to his father while he was alive, not a single letter remains either to his father or his mother. In regard to the letters to his mother, Joachim Pissarro has conjectured that Camille may have destroyed them, because he was:

eager to erase all traces of her turbulent and contemptuous attitude toward his wife. Pissarro married a woman who represented everything his mother did not want for her son. When he met her, Julie ...was employed as the cook's helper in his mother's house. She was not Jewish; she came from an ordinary social background; her family had no money, she...could speak no languages other than French.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that their children would not be Jewish was probably an added reason for Rachel Pissarro's ongoing refusal to speak to Julie. Although they were already the parents of two children (a third had died shortly after birth) it was only in 1871, in London, away from Pissarro's mother, that the couple were finally married in a civil ceremony. Even thereafter, Camille's dependence on his mother for financial assistance until he was in his forties undoubtedly complicated matters.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout his life, in varying degrees, the "Jewish problem" would manifest itself in different ways. At times, as we have seen, it would be connected to his relations with his immediate family. In others instances, however, it would have to do with how he interacted with friends and art world associates. Shikes and Harper, in their excellent biography of Pissarro (much quoted in this essay), make note of many such instances that they discovered in contemporary texts. From these it is clearly apparent that Pissarro's friends and associates were quite aware and frequently took note of his Jewish origins.

### **The 1870s and 1880s**

In the late seventies, the Impressionists' meeting place in Paris was the Café de la Nouvelle-Athènes, on the Place Pigalle. The writer George Moore was one of the regulars. Of Pissarro he wrote:

No one was kinder than Pissarro. He would always take the trouble to explain to the students from the Beaux-Arts why Jules Lefèvre was not a great master of drawing. Pissarro was a wise and appreciative Jew, and he looked like Abraham; his beard was white

and his hair was white and he was bald, though at the time he could not have been much more than fifty.<sup>14</sup>

Another, less kind reference to Pissarro as the archetype of an Old Testament Jew, was made by Félicien Champsaur who wrote that he resembled, 'with his bald forehead, his spiritual eyes under black eyebrows, Abraham in an opera-bouffe with his long hoary beard.'<sup>15</sup> Yet others greeted him with 'Hail to Moses' when he arrived.<sup>16</sup>

There was, however, no trace of the Old Testament in his painting. Pissarro found it ironic that Millet, to whom he was often compared, was much more influenced by the Old Testament than he was: '...[the critics] all throw Millet at me, but Millet's art was biblical. For the Hebrew that I am, there is very little of that in me; isn't that funny?'<sup>17</sup> In this telling quote, Pissarro points both to his alienation from his family's traditions, which find no echo in his work ('there is very little of that in me'), and to the fact that his Jewish origins remained a part of his self-definition ('for the Hebrew that I am').

Pissarro never denied his origins, but there were times when it seemed that being designated an outsider troubled him and his confidence was shaken. During the wrangling over the 1882 Impressionist exhibition, Renoir's brother made some unpleasant remarks. In this regard Pissarro wrote to his good friend Claude Monet:

Do you know, my dear Monet, that the younger brother of Renoir is really insufferable, not that his complete nonsense has any effect on me...It seems that I am a prime schemer without talent, a mercenary Jew, playing underhanded tricks...It is so absurd that I pay no attention to it, only the dangerous aspect of it is the dispute he stirs up, the discord he tries to provoke...Is it because I am an intruder in the group?<sup>18</sup>

Although we find scattered references to Pissarro's Jewish origins during the 1870s and 1880s, they do not seem to have caused him either significant problems or pause for thought. Those two decades were devoted, in the main, to breakthroughs in his work, dedication to advancing the Impressionist cause, and to his growing family. Then, at the end of the 1880s, specifically in 1889, we find in his personal life, his correspondence, and in his work, indications that his Jewish origins remain problematic. These occurrences foreshadow a preoccupation with this subject during the last decade of his life, from 1894 until his death in 1903. The catalyst was the *cause célèbre* of those years, the Dreyfus Affair, as a result of which Pissarro's Jewish consciousness was

heightened, and a change in his perception of his own identity ensued.

But before looking at that last decade, it is instructive to return first to the year 1889. During that year, Pissarro's eldest son Lucien met Esther Bensusan, a friend of Pissarro's niece Esther Isaacson, while she and her London-based family were visiting Paris. The two young people corresponded thereafter. Esther came from a middle-class family of Spanish-Jewish descent. Her father, Jacob Bensusan, was a respectable merchant, conservative, and also very Orthodox. In November 1890, Lucien began teaching drawing in London and the romance progressed further. The affair came to a head in the spring of 1892, when Esther confronted her father with her wish to marry Lucien. Jacob insisted that the marriage take place in a synagogue, that Lucien embrace Judaism—which he refused to do, with Esther's support—that any children be raised as Jews, and that any sons be circumcised.<sup>19</sup>

Lucien appealed to his father for help. Once again Camille Pissarro found himself embroiled in a marriage dispute connected, among other things, to the "Jewish problem". Despite Pissarro's efforts, and his well-known talents as an arbitrator, the two fathers could find no common ground. Bensusan threatened to disown his daughter if she married Lucien. As an immediate solution was not in sight, Lucien and Esther married in a civil ceremony in an English Registry office, just as his father and mother had done. After their honeymoon the newlyweds hiked to Eragny, where they spent the first year of their marriage under the protection of the Pissarros.

1889 was a difficult time for Pissarro. It not only marked the beginning of Lucien's problematic romance, but it was also the year his mother died, at the age of ninety-four. In addition, he was having serious problems with his work. Having embraced Seurat's Neo-Impressionist ideas in 1886, by 1889 Pissarro was becoming disenchanted with the new technique. Moreover, his adoption of Neo-Impressionism was having a disastrous effect on sales. Once again, this time nearing his sixtieth birthday, he was in economic difficulty. His break with Impressionism had another dramatic effect on his life. During that period he virtually ceased all contact with his former colleagues, including Monet and Degas.<sup>20</sup>

All these things may have led to the discouraged state of mind that caused him to write a unique letter to his niece Esther Isaacson, on May 1, 1889, suggesting that his lack of acceptance as a painter was related to his being Jewish. '...a matter of race, probably. Until now, no Jew has made art here, or rather no Jew has searched to make a disinterested and truly felt art. I believe that this could be one of the causes of my bad luck...'. But if, in what may have been a depressed or despairing moment, Pissarro attributed "one of the causes"



Fig. 3: "Capitol" from *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, 1890, Pen and ink, Private Collection

of his bad luck to discrimination, he immediately put forward, in addition, a purely work related reason: 'I am too serious to please the masses' he continued, ' and I don't partake enough of the exotic tradition to be appreciated by the dilettantes.'<sup>21</sup>

It was also in 1889, in a series of twenty-eight pen-and-ink drawings, *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, that Pissarro created a rare visual representation of his political beliefs. Here he expressed his deep contempt for Parisian society, and his strong compassion for the exploited. *Les Turpitudes* were made for the "education" of his nieces, Esther and Alice Isaacson, and not meant for publication. Even so it is surprising to find that Pissarro used exaggerated anti-Semitic stereotypes for certain figures in this series. In *Capital*, the prominent hooked nose, potbelly and soft hands make the Jewish allusion easily discernible (Fig.3). In a letter to his nieces accompanying the drawings, Pissarro described this thus: 'In a word it represents the divinity of the day in a portrait of a Bischoffheim, of an Oppenheim, of a Rothschild, of a Gould, whatever. It



Fig. 4: "The New Idolators" an illustration for *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, 1890, Pen and brown ink over brief indications in pencil on glazed paper, The Denver Museum of Art

is without distinction, vulgar and ugly.'<sup>22</sup> In *The Temple of the Golden Calf*, the hooked-nose figures of Jews appear prominently in the foreground. And, in *The New Idolators* (originally intended for the series but omitted), two of the top-hatted capitalists carrying a golden calf, have distorted, Jewish-looking features (Fig.4).

Both Ralph Shikes and Linda Nochlin, in her excellent article on Degas' anti-Semitism,<sup>23</sup> are at pains to explain why Pissarro used these offensive stereotypes. Shikes contends that Pissarro's attitude was essentially a class attitude of the radical artist towards the wealthy Jews of finance and the stock market. He also reminds us that an anti-Semitic streak runs through some of the anarchist and radical literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that big noses were a convention of radical imagery, and that these drawings were meant for private consumption. Nochlin adds that 'In Pissarro's case, it was simply that no other visual signs worked so effectively and with such immediacy to signify

capitalism as the hook nose and pot belly of the stereotypical Jew.'<sup>24</sup> Even if we accept all these explanations, it is clear that at this juncture Pissarro is at best unaware of the dangers of anti-Semitic caricatures. Employing an effective image to advance his political stance was more important to him at this point than refraining from the slur on all Jews implied in such depictions. He does not yet understand that such conventions, aimed at the Jews of finance, could be used to justify hating all Jews.

### **The Dreyfus Affair**

On December 22, 1894 Captain Alfred Dreyfus was convicted by a French military court of treason and sentenced to incarceration on Devil's Island. Dreyfus had allegedly passed French military secrets to German intelligence. An unpopular, ambitious officer, of cold personality, Dreyfus was also Jewish. Moreover, he was not from one of the Parisian or Bordeaux families that had long since been assimilated, but rather from an Alsatian family that had emigrated to France after the cession of Alsace to Germany.

Over a period of time, evidence gradually began to accumulate pointing to Dreyfus' innocence. As more and more evidence surfaced, France became divided into two camps. On one side were those who supported the army and contended that Dreyfus was guilty. On the other side were those who supported justice and believed Dreyfus innocent. The "Dreyfus Affair" pitted neighbor against neighbor, and friend against friend. The Impressionists were not impervious to the clash. Monet, Pissarro and radical artists like Luce, Signac and Vallotton, as well as critics such as Duret, Ajalbert, Geffroy and Mirbeau came eventually to support Dreyfus. So too did the Symbolist writers and critics Fénéon, Gustave Kahn, Adam and Tailhade. Among those on the opposite side were some of Pissarro's oldest friends: Cézanne, Renoir, Degas, Guillaumin and Forain. Joachim Pissarro contends that Pissarro's being Jewish was only a 'fragment of the truth' that led to his support of Dreyfus.

Pissarro did not spontaneously join forces with the Dreyfusards... At the beginning of the Dreyfus Affair, therefore, it is clear that Pissarro was largely influenced by views expressed in the anarchist press, which saw in this case a problem strictly internal to the bourgeoisie and capitalism. When the artist decided to change his mind, it was in recognition of the justice of Emile Zola's 'courageous deed'.<sup>25</sup>

This, however, was probably not the case, since Pissarro was already convinced of Dreyfus' innocence before Zola took his public stand in his famous article

*J'Accuse*. What transpired was, in fact, even more interesting and complex. To best understand Pissarro's changing attitudes, it is instructive to follow the development of ideas in the mind of the French-Jewish anarchist intellectual, Bernard Lazare. Pissarro's changing ideas were influenced by Lazare's, and it is possible to see a parallel development in the two men. Lazare was one of the few to become convinced early on that the court-martial had wrongfully convicted Dreyfus. Coming, however, from an anarchist background, he did not immediately perceive the significance of the Dreyfus case, nor the rabid anti-Semitism that followed in its wake. Bernard Lazare came from an assimilated Jewish family from Nîmes. While still a young man, he quickly made a name for himself in Paris as a literary critic and anarchist, and by 1892 was appointed director of the Symbolist organ *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*. Two years previously, in 1890, he had published two articles on the Jewish question, also in *Entretiens*. These articles distinguished between the *Israélites* (cultivated French Jews who had absorbed Latin civilization) and *Juifs* (foreign Jews, rich or poor). The latter he viewed as mean, narrow-minded, sly and unscrupulous, owing their allegiance only to the 'Golden Calf'. The terminology and imagery he used was very similar to that of Pissarro's in his drawings and the letter accompanying *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, from around this same date.

As was the case with Pissarro, Lazare too was using accepted rhetorical conventions, albeit applying them selectively. As Robert S. Wistrich so concisely explains,

The milieu in which he (Lazare) moved was thoroughly infiltrated with anti-Semitism, which in nineteenth-century France had long been a feature of the Left. Hatred of the Rothschild 'dynasty' was almost obligatory in socialist and anarchist circles...Hence there was nothing especially surprising in the fact that a young Jew, ignorant of his tradition and history, should identify with the commonplace anti-Semitic stereotypes of the time.<sup>26</sup>

In 1894 Lazare published a study entitled *L'Antisémitisme, son histoire et ses causes*, which still presented the Jews as at least partly responsible for their own fate. The Dreyfus Affair, which broke out only a few months after *L'Antisémitisme* was published, forced him to re-examine his views and revise his opinions. His re-assessment began in November 1894 in the aftermath of the smear campaign against Dreyfus in the press, which ultimately made a guilty verdict inevitable. Edouard Drumont, a long time outspoken propagator of anti-Semitism, immediately exploited the Dreyfus trial to whip up a frenzied xenophobic crusade in France.

Even the most assimilated French Israelite now discovered he was after all only a pariah, living in a new ghetto surrounded by an impenetrable wall of suspicion...This latent hatred was more shocking for the sensitive, educated Jew...It awakened for the first time in Bernard Lazare an understanding of the ambiguity of emancipation and the pariah quality of Jewish existence.<sup>27</sup>

In a small pamphlet entitled *Antisémitisme et Révolution* (March 1895), Lazare for the first time unmasked the pseudo-socialist, demagogic character of Drumont's propaganda. Then, in 1896, he published *Contre l'antisémitisme, histoire d'une polémique*. This was a brochure of a four-week public debate (18 May to 14 June 1896) that Drumont conducted from *La Libre Parole* and Bernard-Lazare from the radical paper *Le Voltaire*.<sup>28</sup> The energetic and unequivocal declaration of war contained in *Contre l'antisémitisme* writes Nelly Wilson, 'was proof that there was at least one determined and fully alert Jew to take on Drumont, his supporters and his backers.'<sup>28</sup> By this time Lazare was convinced that anti-Semitism aimed to destroy the fundamental values of the French revolutionary tradition by reversing the Edict of Emancipation and abrogating the Rights of Man. He further observed that the attacks on the Jewish barons of finance masked an attack on all Jews. What was at stake was not Jewish monopoly of the Stock Exchange but the Jew's rights as a man and a citizen. Camille Pissarro had also come to this realization. He read *Contre l'antisémitisme* and wrote the following letter to Bernard Lazare (Fig. 5):

Rouen,  
Hotel d'Angleterre,  
quai Boëldieu  
13 Sept. 96

Dear Sir,  
I was away on a trip when your little brochure on anti-Semitism arrived, and I would like to write you a word of my great sympathy for the man and for the writer who was able to puncture that "windbag" Drumont. Not knowing your address, I have written you care of *L'Echo de Paris*. I need not tell you how much I share your ideas about the anti-Semitic movement and how pleased I was to see a Semite defending, in such an eloquent manner, my ideas; only a knowledgeable Jewish anarchist would be capable of



raising his voice with such authority. You have been courageous and you did your duty.

I send respectful greetings to your wife, and remain your devoted  
C. Pissarro.<sup>29</sup>

This letter suggests that Pissarro identified totally with Lazare and his pamphlet. He here expresses his complete agreement with Lazare's ideas regarding anti-Semitism, and praises his courage. Moreover, Pissarro is particularly pleased that these ideas, which are so congruent with his own, have been put forth by a Jew. It is, however, not clear what he meant in writing 'you did your duty'. Did Pissarro think that 'a knowledgeable Jewish anarchist' like Lazare and himself had a responsibility to speak out and take a stand? His letter of support to Lazare suggests that he did.

In any event, it seems likely that at this point Pissarro had become sensitized to the various manifestations of anti-Semitism and to their dangerous consequences. The use of anti-Semitic conventions that came so easily to him in the 1889 *Turpitude* drawings, would at this time have been, at the very least, cause for careful reflection. Like Lazare, he would by now have understood that such caricatures were a ploy used to engender hatred of all Jews. On January 27, 1898 he made this distinction in a letter to his son: 'Unfortunately, the masses haven't the least understanding of what is going on; they assume a social struggle is being waged against Capital without asking themselves who will be defeated - they dislike the Jewish bankers, and rightly, but they have a weakness for the Catholic bankers, which is idiotic.'<sup>30</sup>

For Lazare, the understanding of the evil effects of anti-Semitism was followed by the comprehension that Dreyfus could be, and in fact was, innocent. On November 6, 1896, Lazare published his first pamphlet in the Dreyfusard campaign. *Une erreur judiciaire; la vérité sur l'affaire Dreyfus*. Three thousand copies were sent out to influential personalities. Initially the reaction of his anarchist comrades was cool and hostile. Lazare found himself alone. Friends deserted him, and overnight doors closed on him.

This first tract was followed in 1897 by a second, *Une erreur judiciaire. L'Affaire Dreyfus, (deuxième mémoire avec des expertises d'écritures)*. Pissarro's reaction was swift. On November 14, 1897, he wrote to Lucien:

I am sending you a batch of newspapers that will bring you up to date on the Dreyfus case, which is so agitating public opinion. You will realize that the man may well be innocent; at any rate, there are honorable people in high positions who assert that he is

Rouen  
 Hotel d'Angleterre  
 quai Boëldieu

13 sept 96

Cher Monsieur

Je parlais en voyage quand  
 votre petite brochure sur l'Anti-  
 sémitisme m'est parvenue, je  
 vous aurais bien écrit un mot  
 de grande sympathie pour l'homme  
 et d'éloge pour l'écrivain qui a  
 su si bien trouver de part et part  
 cette grosse caisse de Drumont;  
 mais ignorant votre adresse  
 j'hésitais à vous écrire à l'Echo  
 de Paris.

Inutile de vous dire combien  
 je partage vos idées sur le mou-  
 vement anti-sémitique et com-  
 bien je suis heureux de voir  
 un sémitte défendre si éloquem-  
 ment ses idées; il n'y a d'il-  
 lustré, qu'un Juif anarchiste  
 et savant capable d'élever la  
 voix avec autorité! Vous avez  
 été courageux et vous avez fait  
 votre devoir.

Présenter, je vous prie mes  
 salutations respectueuses à votre  
 dame et croyez moi votre dévoué

C. Pissarro.

K11/77

Fig. 5: Postcard from Camille Pissarro to Bernard Lazare, Rouen, Hotel d'Angleterre, Quai Boëldieu, dated 13 September 1896. Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

innocent. The new brochure of Bernard Lazare, which has just appeared, proves that the document that the General gave the press is a forgery. Lazare's contention is supported by twelve scientists of different nationalities. Isn't it dreadful?<sup>31</sup>

It seems, therefore, that Bernard Lazare's pamphlets had already convinced Pissarro of Dreyfus' innocence in November, 1897. Two months later, a military court acquitted the obviously guilty officer, Major Esterhazy. In response, Emile Zola wrote his scathing article with the inflammatory title, *J'ACCUSE*, which Clemenceau's *L'Aurore* published on January 13, 1898. In it he charged the War Office and leading military figures with misconduct during both trials. His article catalyzed French passions. Anti-Jewish riots broke out in the provinces.

Like all the Impressionists, Pissarro had been estranged from Zola because of his critical attitude toward Impressionism in the nineties. Now, his statement prompted an immediate letter of support: 'Accept the expression of my admiration for your great courage and the nobility of your character. Your Old Comrade.'<sup>32</sup> A month later, when Zola was convicted of slandering the judges in the Esterhazy trial, Pissarro hastened to write him. 'I am among those who believe that you are rendering a proud service to France, your great cry of an honest man has rectified her moral sense, she will be proud one day to have borne you.'<sup>33</sup>

On the day that Zola's *J'ACCUSE* was published, Pissarro wrote to his niece Esther,

The Dreyfus case is causing many horrible things to be said here. I will send you *L'Aurore*, which has very fine pieces by Clemenceau and Zola. Today Zola accuses the General Staff. Ajalbert has published a very brave article in *Les Droits de l'homme*, but the majority of the public is against Dreyfus, despite the bad faith shown in the Esterazy affair. I heard Guillaumin saying that if Dreyfus had been shot at once, people would have been spared all this commotion! He is not the only one who is of this opinion. At Durand-Ruel's, everyone took this view except for the doorman, and I heard many others speak that way too. Alas for a people so great in '93 and '48!<sup>34</sup>

Pissarro's state of mind at this time was well described by Shikes and Harper:

As events built up, Pissarro's involvement deepened. As a Jew, he felt menaced by the passions that surfaced during the tumult over the affair. His sense of justice was outraged. He believed in Dreyfus's innocence; his antennae indicated that the forces of the Right – all the groups he despised as anti-social – were aligned

behind the anti-Dreyfussards; he was distressed by the violence of superpatriotic mobs and anti-Semitic ruffians. At one point, he even felt threatened with deportation.<sup>35</sup>

On a personal level, the Dreyfus affair took its toll on Pissarro. In the fall of 1898 he wrote to Lucien,

Yesterday, at about five o'clock, while on my way to Durand-Ruel, I found myself in the middle of a gang of young scamps seconded by ruffians. They shouted: 'Death to the Jews! Down with Zola!' I calmly passed through them and reached the rue Lafitte...they had not even taken me for a Jew (Fig. 6).<sup>36</sup>

Although he assured his son that he did not fear for his own safety, he continued in that same letter:

France is really sick, will she recover?...Yesterday I received a card from Mirbeau asking me to sign the protest with Monet and various others. Despite the grave turn of affairs in Paris, despite all these anxieties, I must work at my window as if nothing has happened.<sup>37</sup>

The constraints of his work imposed themselves on Pissarro even though he took the Dreyfus Affair very much to heart. He continued to paint, despite his anxieties, but he was evidently so caught up in the Affair that his wife Julie became angry about it: 'Doubtless the affaire Zola takes all your time, so you can't write me...That interests you much more than your family.'<sup>38</sup> Pissarro was such a devoted family man that his preoccupation must have been great to draw such fire from his wife.

Although Pissarro certainly took the political ramifications of the Dreyfus Affair and its anti-Semitic repercussions very seriously, his involvement, for the most part, remained on the ideological and polemical plane. More painful would have been the personal slights to which he was subjected, sometimes from people he admired greatly. The worst must have been Degas' behavior towards his long time friend and colleague.

From the 1870s onward Degas and Pissarro were the only Impressionists that persisted in their unwavering defiance of the Salons. They were fellow militants in their firm resolution to defy the stifling academic art establishment. In his biography of his great grandfather, Joachim Pissarro, tells us: 'Degas was, incidentally, the artist to whom Pissarro referred the most often throughout his correspondence: their intense and mutual admiration was based on a kinship of ethical as well as aesthetic concerns.'<sup>39</sup> And regarding Pissarro's ongoing



Fig. 6: Camille Pissarro, ca 1895. Musée Pissarro, Pontoise

openness to new techniques in printmaking he continues; 'The artist with whom he most shared this passionate technical audacity was again Degas, whose methods he studied and regularly mentioned in his correspondence with his son Lucien.'<sup>40</sup> Degas was one of the first to have bought Pissarro's paintings, and Pissarro admired Degas above all the other Impressionists, maintaining that he was 'without doubt the greatest artist of the period.'<sup>41</sup>

Degas also had a number of other Jewish friends, some of whom he saw constantly, and whose portraits appear in several of his paintings. Yet of all those who had participated in the Impressionist exhibitions, Degas became the most irrationally anti-Dreyfus. During the nineties, he had maintained a certain amount of cordial though infrequent contact with Pissarro. As late as January 1898, they met at an exhibition Degas had arranged at Vollard's for a young protégé of his. Pissarro wrote to his son George about meeting Degas at

the exhibition and urged him to visit the show. Thereafter, Degas never spoke to Pissarro again.<sup>42</sup> Degas became a savage anti-Semite. He blamed the Jews for all of France's troubles. At breakfast he had his maid read aloud to him the more lurid passages of Drumont's wildly anti-Semitic newspaper.<sup>43</sup> Ajalbert wrote about Degas, on January 20, 1898, telling of a model he had thrown out of his studio because she expressed doubts as to Dreyfus' guilt. After reading this, Pissarro referred to Degas the next day in a letter to Lucien as 'the ferocious anti-Semite'.<sup>44</sup> A sad confirmation of Degas' and Renoir's behavior is found in a February 11, 1898 entry in Paul Signac's diary: 'Pissarro tells me that since the anti-Semitic incidents, Degas and Renoir shun him and no longer greet him. What can be taking place in the minds of such intelligent men that leads them to become so stupid?'<sup>45</sup>

When Pissarro died, Degas did not attend the funeral. He expressed his regrets to Lucien, giving illness as the excuse. But to his friend Henri Rouart he wrote:

So he has died, the poor old wandering Jew. He will walk no more, and if one had been warned, one would certainly have walked a little behind him. What has he been thinking since the nasty affair, what did he think of the embarrassment one felt, in spite of oneself, in his company? Did he ever say a word to you? What went on inside that old Israelite head of his? Did he think only of going back to the times when we were pretty nearly unaware of his terrible race?<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most incisive summing up of Degas' behavior was made by Linda Nochlin; 'One must conclude that although Degas was indeed an extraordinary artist, a brilliant innovator, and one of the most important figures in the artistic vanguard of the nineteenth century, he was a perfectly ordinary anti-Semite.'<sup>47</sup>

Pissarro and Bernard Lazare died in the same year, 1903. Lazare's fight against anti-Semitism and his support of Dreyfus had led him to conclude that the only answer to the Jewish problem was Jewish nationalism. He became a Zionist. It was the solution of a young man. He was only thirty-eight when he died. Pissarro was seventy-three, not a time to radically alter your worldview. Pissarro remained true to anarchist beliefs, but the course of events had not left him untouched.

Although they lived to see Dreyfus pardoned, and they witnessed his petition for a retrial, neither Pissarro nor Lazar was alive to see the verdict reversed. Dreyfus was only fully vindicated in 1906, three years after Camille

Pissarro had been laid to rest in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, in the family plot, next to his father, mother and grandfather.

What does this all mean? Very little in regard to Pissarro's painting, which appears not to have been affected in any significant way. It does, however, give us a better understanding of a Jewish artist's dilemma in late 19<sup>th</sup> c. France. Pissarro, after all, was of a new breed. Though of Jewish origin, he succeeded in entering the mainstream of the Parisian avant-garde, and he desired to be judged solely by universal art standards. In this sense, he became a path blazer for the many artists of Jewish origin who would come to Paris in the early 20<sup>th</sup> c.

As we know, the anti-Semitism that Pissarro encountered did not disappear in the new century. As the number of Jewish artists (and dealers, collectors, publishers etc.) increased, a new strand of anti-Semitism took shape. In its reconfigured form that culminated in the 1930s, it would prove to be even more monstrous and deadly. In the interim, however, following Pissarro's example, an important group of artists were able to "surmount" the prejudices related to their Jewish roots, and move into the forefront of the Modern Art movement.

### **Postscript**

I would like to conclude with a few remarks on the continued connection of Pissarro and his work with the Israel Museum. On December 16, 1952, Mordecai Narkis, director of the Bezalel Museum, which would later form part of the Israel Museum, wrote to Paul-Emile Pissarro, Camille Pissarro's youngest son. In this letter he thanked Paul-Emile for the two etchings by his father and the painting by his own hand that he had donated to the museum. The gifts were duly noted in the catalogue of the *Exposition d'oeuvres d'art français contemporaines*, catalogue of the Bezalel National Museum, Jerusalem, 15 Nov.-20 Dec. 1952. Narkis went on to say that he understood Paul-Emile had promised an exhibition of his father's work for the following year to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Camille Pissarro's death. That exhibition never happened. However, some forty years later, in October 1994, Joachim Pissarro, Paul-Emile's grandson, made good that promise and co-curated with me a highly successful Pissarro retrospective at the Israel Museum. The exhibition was subsequently shown at the Jewish Museum, New York.

It is also worth noting that there are seven oil paintings by Pissarro in the collection of the Israel Museum (Fig. 7).<sup>48</sup> These paintings are all donations, and they represent a group of works larger by far than that of any other



Fig. 7: *The Tuileries Gardens, Afternoon, Sun*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm. The Israel Museum Jerusalem, Gift of Federico and Alicia Halberstam Lieberg, Buenos Aires.

Impressionist artist in the museum's holdings. The museum's holdings also include twenty one Pissarro drawings and eighteen prints. Perhaps it is not by accident that generous donors have seen the Israel Museum as an appropriate repository for the works of Camille Pissarro.

### Notes

1. For the history of the Pissarro family, see Pissarro 1995: 20.
2. For a history of the Jews of Bordeaux, see Malino 1978.
3. *Ibid*: 4.
4. *Ibid*: 15-16.
5. Cavignac 1991: 169.
6. Pissarro 1995: 21.
7. *Ibid*: 21.
8. *Ibid*: 24.
9. Shikes and Harper 1980: 21.
10. *Ibid*: 51. The letter is dated October 7, 1859. Pissarro's correspondence is quoted throughout this essay in English translations from various sources. For the original



- letters in French, see Bailly-Herzberg 1980; Bailly-Herzberg 1986-1991.
11. Pissarro 1995:18.
  12. *Ibid*: 18.
  13. Pissarro 1993: 38
  14. Moore 1906: 39-41.
  15. Shikes and Harper 1980: 142.
  16. *Ibid*: 142.
  17. Bailly-Herzberg 1980: 158 (Letter to Duret, 12 March 1882).
  18. Shikes and Harper 1980: 178.
  19. *Ibid*: 265.
  20. Pissarro 1995: 141
  21. Shikes and Harper 1980: 248 (Letter to Esther Isaacson, May 1, 1889).
  22. *Ibid*: 231 (Letter to Esther and Alice Isaacson).
  23. *Ibid*: 231-234: Nochlin 1987: 96-116.
  24. Nochlin 1987: 109.
  25. Pissarro 1995: 35.
  26. Wistrich 1976:136-7.
  27. *Ibid*. p. 141.
  28. Wilson 1978: 207.
  29. Letter from Camille Pissarro to Bernard Lazare, Rouen, Hotel d'Angleterre, quai Boëldieu, dated 13 Sept. 1896, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
  30. Rewald 1943: 320 (Letter to Lucien dated January 27, 1898).
  31. *Ibid*: 314.
  32. Shikes and Harper 1980: 306 (Letter from Pissarro to Zola, Jan. 14. 1898).
  33. *Ibid*: 306 (Letter from Pissarro to Zola, Feb. 26, 1898).
  34. Rewald 1943: 318.
  35. Shikes and Harper 1980: 305.
  36. Rewald 1943: 332 (Letter dated November 19, 1898).
  37. *Ibid*: 332.
  38. Shikes and Harper 1980: 306 (Unpublished letter from Julie Pissarro, n.d., Musée de Pontoise).
  39. Pissarro 1993: 7.
  40. *Ibid*: 11.
  41. Rewald 1943: 30 (Letter to Lucien, Osny, May 9, 1883).
  42. Shikes and Harper 1980: 307.
  43. *Ibid*.
  44. Rewald 1943: 319 (Letter to Lucien, Paris, January 21, 1898).
  45. Shikes and Harper 1980: 308.
  46. *Ibid*: 308 (Guérin, *Lettres de Degas*, letter no. CLXXXIII).
  47. Nochlin 1987: 109.
  48. Paintings by Camille Pissarro in the Israel Museum's collection:
    1. *The Factory at Pontoise*, 1873  
Oil on canvas, 38 X 55 cm.  
Gift of the Saidye Rosner Bronfman Estate, Montreal, to the Canadian Friends of the Israel Museum.
    2. *Sunset at Eragny*, 1890  
Oil on canvas, 66 x 82.7 cm  
Bequest of Johanna and Ludovic Lawrence.
    3. *Portrait of Jeanne*, ca. 1893

- Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm.  
Bequest of Blanche T. Weisberg, to American Friends of the Israel Museum.
4. *Bountiful Harvest* (also known as *The Hayrackers*)  
Oil on canvas, 43 x 54 cm.  
Gift of the Sara Lee Corporation, Chicago, to American Friends of the Israel Museum
  5. *Morning, Sunlight Effect, Eragny, 1899*  
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm.  
Bequest of Mrs. Neville Blond, O.B.E., London, to British Friends of the Art Museums of Israel.
  6. *The Tuileries Gardens, Afternoon, Sun, 1900*  
Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm.  
Gift of Federico and Alicia Halberstam Lieberg, Buenos Aires.
  7. *The Louvre, Morning, Spring, 1902*  
Oil on canvas, 65 X 54 cm.  
Bequest of Otto and Rita Blau, Lugano.
- On long term loans:**
1. *Landscape near Pontoise, the Auvers Road, 1881*  
Long term loan from the Sara and Moshe Mayer Collection, Tel Aviv.
  2. *Boulevard Montmartre: Spring, 1897*  
Oil on canvas, 65 X 81 cm.  
Long term loan from the daughter-in-law and heir of Max Silberberg, Breslau

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