
H-France Review Vol. 19 (October 2019), No. 192

Sarah Lees and Richard R. Brettell, *Innovative Impressions: Prints by Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro*. Tulsa, Okla.: Philbrook Museum of Art, 2018. xiii + 130 pp. Figures, plates, catalogue, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 (hb). ISBN 978-3-7774-2978-6.

Review by Britany Salsbury, Cleveland Museum of Art.

For most readers, the term Impressionism likely calls to mind largescale, brightly colored paintings composed of rapid brushstrokes. Such works are those most frequently taught in the context of art history classes and seen in museum galleries. Many of the artists associated with Impressionism, however, experimented with a range of other media, and the group featured sculpture, drawings, and prints alongside paintings in the exhibitions that they organized between 1874 and 1886. Printmaking, in particular, became a primary focus and a lasting interest for several artists. During a concentrated period around 1879, Mary Cassatt, Edgar Degas, and Camille Pissarro worked collaboratively in etching, a technique that experienced a revival in mid-nineteenth century Paris. As *Innovative Impressions: Prints by Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro*, an exhibition catalogue authored by Sarah Lees and Richard R. Brettell, demonstrates, the inherently collaborative nature of printmaking allowed these artists to advance the style and subject matter of their work in unexpected and innovative ways.

Impressionism and printmaking might seem like an unlikely pairing at first glance; in contrast to these artists' painted works, prints--or at least those that artists and their viewers would have been aware of during the mid-nineteenth century--were mostly small, black and white, composed of distinct lines, and straightforwardly representational. Around this time, with some notable exceptions, the primary purpose of prints was to inexpensively replicate paintings rather than to create original works of art. The people who made such works were thought of not as artists but rather as craftspeople. The status of prints began to change around 1860, when publisher Alfred Cadart and printer Auguste Delâtre initiated a major revival of etching--the process that Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro ultimately took up. Etching is an intaglio medium and consists of coating the surface of a printing plate with a waxy material, which an artist draws through with a needle, incising the metal beneath. Because of the wax's malleability, the process feels much like drawing and allows for a free and expressive line. Once an image is complete, the plate is placed into acid, which bites into the exposed lines, and then inked and printed. Etching had been favored by numerous illustrious printmakers throughout its history, including, most famously, Rembrandt van Rijn and Francisco de Goya, but had generally fallen out of fashion by the start of the nineteenth century. Delâtre and Cadart brought a new wave of interest to the medium by forming the Société des Aquafortistes, an organization that provided training and exhibition space, and publishing curated portfolios of etchings marketed to

interested collectors. Perhaps most relevant to Impressionism, the etching revival established the process as an experimental medium that could be self-taught and practiced in the privacy of one's own studio. To Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro, it served as an iterative, creative, and low stakes process in which new techniques were invented and old ones refined so that the exact desired visual effect could be accomplished.

Although the literature on Impressionism is vast, less has been written on these artists' accomplishments in printmaking. In its tight focus on the output of three specific artists, *Innovative Impressions* builds primarily on Michel Melot's foundational 1994 book *L'Estampe impressioniste*, which provides an encyclopedic and comprehensive account of the origins, accomplishments, and legacy of virtually all intersections of printmaking and the Impressionist movement.[1] Numerous monographic texts have treated Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro specifically, many of them exhibition catalogues or catalogues raisonnés.[2] More recently, still others have focused on Impressionist pairings in which prints have played a key role.[3] Lees' and Kendall's text is the first to focus specifically on the triumvirate in question as a collective rather than as individuals and to posit more extensively what their collaboration might have contributed to the history of printmaking and Impressionism.

Innovative Impressions takes the format of an exhibition catalogue and was published in conjunction with a show of the same title on view at the Philbrook Museum of Art during summer 2018. As the book's foreword explains, this project was inspired originally by the 2015 acquisition by the museum of its first work by Pissarro—an etching showing a view of Rouen (p. ix). The exhibition featured approximately 100 works on paper, all of which are listed at the end of the text.[4] The book consists of two essays: an examination of the history of artistic collaboration by art historian Richard R. Brettell, a specialist in Impressionism, and an overview of the exhibition's major themes by its curator, Sarah Lees. A catalogue featuring technical information, provenance, and selected references for each of the exhibited works (by Sarah Lees with the assistance of Corinne Kannenberg) follows the essays.

In his opening essay, "Artistic Collaboration: A Brief History," Brettell examines the varied forms that working relationships between artists have taken from the Renaissance onward, a topic which, as he demonstrates, has been downplayed due to the monographic focus dominant throughout art historical literature and museum exhibitions. He cites numerous precedents, beginning with the apprentice system that existed before the sixteenth century, for the practice of collaboration, from assisting a master artist to working together on a single finished work. Brettell convincingly attributes the deemphasis on this type of work to scholarship itself, and describes a shift, observable in the writing on Impressionism, that has gradually become more inclusive of the concept.

As he argues, virtually all avant-garde movements in France beginning in the mid-nineteenth century were collaborative. Brettell traces a lineage from a group of artists working in the northern French town of Arras beginning in the 1850s, who combined technical knowledge on printmaking and photography to create a hybrid technique called the *cliché verre*, through the artists who collectively developed and implemented pointillism in Paris decades later. Closer examination of the interactions between such groupings—of which Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro are an important example—is pivotal, in his view, for a revisionary analysis of the field and "the wide-ranging impact of these types of collaborations and how they shaped the arc of art's history" (p. 9).

In her longer essay, Lees provides a detailed account of the history, major accomplishments, and important works that resulted from Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro's extended collaboration. The three were an unlikely grouping, given their differences in background and experience. They came together around 1879, however, for one specific project: *Le Jour et la nuit*, a journal of prints that the artists developed but never actually realized. As Lees suggests throughout, beginning at this point the three had a "shared interest in techniques [that] drew them together through interactions that...developed a new visual language. This complex dynamic of artistic interchange...was the ground from which their printed work sprang, and highlighting it provides a new perspective on the creative processes each of them followed" (pp. 12-13). For these artists, printmaking served as a locus of experimentation, and their work in the medium was just as much about the creative process as it was a finished work.

Lees's essay proceeds chronologically and begins by examining key precedents of which Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro were aware. In particular, she cites the influence of the etching revival and specifically the artist Félix Bracquemond. The latter was an important bridge between reproductive and original printmaking who befriended the Impressionists and contributed over 30 etchings to their first exhibition in 1874. Ludovic Lépic, a longtime friend of Degas, likewise influenced the group with his invention of *eau-forte mobile*, a technique that included manipulating ink on the surface of a printing plate to create an original image, "in contrast to the fixed and unchanging nature of a standard, traditional print" (p. 21). The influence of these artists, and of important art critics such as Charles Blanc, inspired the experimental approach undertaken by Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro soon after.

Lees traces the early attempts of the three artists in etching beginning with Degas, who had experimented with the technique as early as 1856. In the ensuing decades, he went on to learn virtually every aspect of the process, seeing it more as a starting point for further consideration than an endpoint in itself. While Degas was influenced early on by past masters of printmaking, such as Rembrandt, Pissarro was inspired by the work of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, an artist just a generation older, who used a sketchy aesthetic to produce landscape etchings. Cassatt began to make etchings latest of the three, upon learning the technique from Degas after he invited her to exhibit with the Impressionists in 1877. From the very beginning, she embraced a radical, unfinished aesthetic in her prints and adopted subjects, such as the female nude, that did not appear in her paintings.

The paths of the trio converged, Lees argues, in 1879, when they embarked on *Le Jour et la nuit*, which she describes as "the crux of the [ir] collaborative working relationship" (pp. 31-32). Although the journal itself never appeared, Lees outlines all known documentation of its existence, from a cover design by Bracquemond to a mention in Cassatt's mother's correspondence. She also closely analyzes the prints that the three artists are known to have created for the journal, demonstrating the distinctive but shared visual aesthetic that had evolved in the work of each at this time. This analysis convincingly demonstrates the centrality of *Le Jour et la nuit* at the intersection of these three artists' work, and of Impressionist painting and printmaking.

Throughout the remainder of the essay, Lees shows the influence of this foundational period on each artists' work in printmaking over the ensuing decades. Although they moved apart socially, Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro's efforts continued to overlap, as did their shared interest

in experimentation. Pissarro and Degas both developed an interest in monotype, a printmaking technique that involves creating an image with ink directly on the surface of a printing plate, resulting in one unique impression. Both artists used new and distinctive means to manipulate ink, including a wire brush and even fingertips, suggesting the continued “value of such dialogue for generating experimental work” (p. 62). Cassatt and Degas both turned their attention to the *toilette* as a subject in their prints—the former in domestic scenes and the latter in depictions of brothels—producing works that diverged in tone but similarly embraced the inherently private conditions of viewing prints. All three artists ultimately developed an interest in color printmaking, which was, Lees argues, “a subject not just of conversation but of a certain degree of contention among them” (p. 82). Cassatt used her prior knowledge of intaglio printmaking to create complicated etchings that evoked the aesthetic of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints, which she featured in her first solo exhibition in 1891. The series caught the attention of both Degas and Pissarro, who had been exploring similar issues in their own work—Degas in a series of virtually abstract landscape monotypes and Pissarro in color etchings and monotypes of his own. As this example indicates, the artists’ interests and working methods continued to intersect and, as Lees concludes, “played a crucial, generative role in each artist’s process, resulting in some of the most innovative works of their careers” (p. 103).

By consolidating these important developments into a cohesive narrative aligned with the development of Impressionist painting, *Innovative Impressions* is an important step toward better integrating printmaking into the expansive literature on Impressionism. Lees persuasively outlines the development and fruition of the relationship between Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro through close reading of the objects they produced. This is an accomplishment particularly given the inherent complexity of describing verbally the printmaking processes these artists used—information that can be daunting even to a reader with some knowledge of the medium. The book benefits greatly from Lees’s synthesis of visual and technical analysis, which allows for a nuanced understanding of these artists’ interest in process over a finished work. There are minor points of criticism to be offered: for example, throughout the otherwise richly-illustrated text some objects are mentioned but not reproduced, leaving the reader wanting more visual evidence. Overall, however, *Innovative Impressions* is a welcome contribution to the literature on Impressionism and on the history of printmaking. By suggesting a new way of looking at an extensively-discussed topic, it will be of interest to both specialists in these fields as well as those with general interest.

NOTES

[1] Michel Melot, *L’Estampe impressioniste* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994). The book was translated into English and published as *The Impressionist Print* in 1996.

[2] Just a few of many examples include Sue Welsh Reed and Barbara Stern Shapiro, *Edgar Degas: The Painter as Printmaker* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1984); and Adelyn Dohme Breeskin, *Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Graphic Work* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979).

[3] For example Nicole Minder, Richard Brettell, and Eric Gillis, *Degas & Pissarro: Alchimie d’une rencontre* (Vevey: Musée Jenisch, 1998); and Kimberly A. Jones et al., *Degas/Cassatt*. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2014).

[4] Eight of these works were loaned by the reviewer's institution, the Cleveland Museum of Art.

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ISSN 1553-9172