

ART REVIEW

Tropical Impressions At a Career's Dawning

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UNCERTAINTY can have its pleasures and challenges, especially when it comes to art. Questions of who created what, or of how a work has found its way from one unlikely place to another, are basic ingredients in the absorbing, often nit-picky investigative game of art history.

Such questions are central to the exhibition "Camille Pissarro in the Caribbean, 1850-1855: Drawings From the Collection at Olana" at the Jewish Museum, beginning with whether certain pieces on view are by Pissarro at all, and why, after a century out of sight, they came to light in a Victorian villa perched above the Hudson River.

The Caribbean part, at least, is easy to explain. Pissarro, one of the core figures in the development of French Impressionism, was born in 1830 on the island of St. Thomas, Danish territory at the time, now part of the United States Virgin Islands and still an Eden of light-glancing water, mercurial weather and verdant landscape lush to the point of suffocation.

His family, Portuguese Jews who had lived for several generations in Bordeaux, established a lucrative import-export business on the island. Pissarro grew up in the main port town, Charlotte Amalie, and was educated locally. Then, at age 11, he was sent to boarding school in Paris, where he developed a passion for art.

Upon returning to St. Thomas five years later, he served as a clerk in his father's shop but devoted most of his time to sketching the life around him: the tall-masted ships, the open-air markets with their mixed population of Europeans and blacks, the tropical forests

spilling down hillsides into the sea.

At some point he met a peripatetic Danish painter, Fritz Melbye, who served as both mentor and friend. The two painted side by side, sharing themes and styles, and in 1852 went to Venezuela on a two-year painting expedition. When Pissarro returned to St. Thomas alone in 1854, he left notebooks, drawings and oil sketches in Melbye's care. And although he may have intended to retrieve the work, he never did. He ended up leaving for Europe, never to return.

By 1860 Melbye had wandered to New York City, where paintings of the tropics were enjoying a vogue, thanks to the example of Frederic Edwin Church. The two artists became friends, traveling to Jamaica in 1865, and when Melbye eventually moved on (he is believed to have died in China in 1869), he left a sizable cache of drawings, including those by Pissarro, behind with Church, who stored them at Olana, his country home in Hudson, N.Y.

Finally, under Church's stewardship, one last twist was added to the episodic history of Pissarro's youthful work. At some point after Melbye's departure, and probably for practical purposes of identification, Church or an associate scrawled the misspelled signature "Melby" in pencil on almost all of the drawings belonging to the Danish artist, thus further obscuring the presence of Pissarro's hand.

In the 1950's, the existence of Pissarros at Olana first came to the attention of scholars. But it is only recently that the authorship of the Melbye group has begun to be sorted out, and the Jewish Museum's gathering of 46 pieces, first exhibited last year at the headquarters of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas in Charlotte Amalie, is one of the fruits of that research.

The show, organized by the art historian Richard R. Brettell, is a low-key affair. Most of the pieces are notional sketches of a type that falls within the bounds of a familiar 19th-century tradition. While a few pieces carry Pissarro's signature, a far greater number do not and have been assigned to him on stylistic grounds. A handful of drawings signed by or attributed to Melbye are also included for purposes of comparison.

Interestingly, the cluster of unsigned pen-and-ink drawings of ships, which opens the show, demonstrates how slippery matters of attribution can be. At a glance, hard-and-fast stylistic distinctions among these images are hard to determine (though works that are probably Melbye's fairly quickly distinguish themselves by their rubbery forms and glassy washes). And while one drawing is logically given to Melbye on the basis of an inscription in Danish, another, labeled a Melbye in the show, was assigned to Pissarro in the show's catalogue just a year ago.

Elsewhere, attributions based on style make immediate visual sense, as when a signed Pissarro is used to identify other drawings by him. In "Long Bay, St. Thomas," a panoramic sweep of mountainous coastline is rendered as a dense fabric of stippling and crosshatching. The same technique recurs in two unsigned pieces, one of buildings lost among trees, the other of a woman and child sitting on a beach, their figures dwarfed by an outcropping of rock.

The chance to engage in such a compare-and-contrast exercise is one of the things that make "Pissarro and the Caribbean" intriguing: every viewer is invited to apply an evaluative eye to the material at hand and to engage in interpretive thinking.

One might, for example, concentrate on similarities rather than differences, evidence of how the sensibilities of two journeyman artists meshed. Or one might stay on the alert for signs of Impressionism in the bud; a lovely oil sketch bearing Pissarro's name, of a scrubby cliffside painted as a near-abstract flurry of strokes, is suggestive in this regard. Or it is possible to pull back and view the show itself as a collective firsthand document of the setting in which one of the 20th century's great artists began his career.

It was a cosmopolitan milieu, but one also exotically far from Europe, and that's what it looks like here. In two drawings, palm trees wave over matchbox houses that seem to float on water. The figures of merchant gentry stand beside those of black women selling fruit in a marketplace; a shyly smiling child carries a jug on his head. Nature is everywhere apparent, as in a graphite study of tropical trees, their bare branches embellished with a nervous tangle of vines, and in a charming, lightly touched picture of bamboo shoots bending to form a cathedral-like arch.

These last two drawings are attributed to Pissarro, and the first of them really does suggest the energy of the fine, responsive hand that would one day break the visible world into a near-visionary explosion of light. But the second? Well, enough to say that nothing else on view looks quite like it, which makes its attribution at least problematic.

It doesn't really matter, though. Like everything else in the show, this little drawing is attractive exactly for its mysteries: it is both an odd piece out in a vexing connoisseurial puzzle and a contributing detail in a larger portrait of a time and a place and a personal history freshly revealed.

"Camille Pissarro in the Caribbean, 1850-1855: Drawings From the Collection at Olana" remains at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92d Street, through Nov. 16. The exhibition is organized by the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, United States Virgin Islands; the Jewish Museum; the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the Olana State Historic Site. It travels to the Albany Institute of Art,

March 28 to June 13, 1998.

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