

Pissarro at Pontoise: Picturing Infrastructure and the Changing Riverine Environment

Genevieve Westerby

In 1872, Camille Pissarro rendered the water of the Oise River rushing over a low dam with short, dashed brushstrokes of pure color (Figure 1). Painted near his home in the rural French village of Pontoise, it features aspects of daily life on this major tributary of the Seine. Canal barges are moored to the opposite bank, their masts mirroring the slender trees that line a path leading to the riparian village of Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône in the background. With his choice of site, where the river splits into two sections to flow around the small island of Saint-Martin, Pissarro depicts how civil engineering transformed the ecosystem of the Oise River.

Throughout the nineteenth century, a range of new infrastructure projects were undertaken in France's rivers. These projects aimed to create a predictable and reliable transportation network; to turn what was a mostly natural system into one that would suit the needs of an increasingly industrialized capitalist economy. Nowhere were these projects more visible or more transformative than on the Seine. Riverbeds were dredged and locks and dams were constructed to overcome two major hindrances to the river's commercial exploitation—its inconsistent depth and its tendency to flood. Canals were dug to form new connections between major river systems to further facilitate the speedy transportation of goods. By midcentury, the Seine was the main artery of the nation's system of rivers, transporting nearly ninety percent of goods to and from the heart of Paris.

These projects also had a profound effect on the environment, which caught the attention of artists and writers alike. In Emile Zola's novel *L'oeuvre*, for example, the author's protagonist, the struggling painter Claude Lantier, laments that a newly constructed dam downriver raised the level of the Seine and changed the landscape at the village of Bennecourt.¹ Lantier had painted there several years before, but when

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¹ Like many details included in Zola's work, this anecdote was likely drawn from his life experiences. Zola knew the landscape at Bennecourt well as he lived there, off and on, between 1866 and 1871.

he later returned to the site, he could scarcely recognize it. Islands were submerged and quiet armlet sections of the river were broadened such that there were "no more pretty nooks, no more rippling alleys to get lost in; a disaster that inclined one to strangle all the river engineers!"² Impressionist painters were also drawn to these feats of engineering and the changed environment around them. Gustave Caillebotte included one such dam, at Bezons, in a view of fishing on the Seine in 1888 (Figure 2). The turbulent, white-foamy water of the dam is visible in the background on the upper right, while fishermen in their boats, lashed to anchoring poles, bob in the foreground.

Fluvial infrastructure projects are just one example of the technological, industrial, and social transformations impacting the environment in this period. Coal-powered trains rushed along newly constructed bridges, factories lined the river's banks and polluted its waters, and fashionable Parisian tourists overwhelmed rural fishing villages and clogged rivers like the Seine with rented boats. Scholars have studied extensively these aspects of modernity and how they manifested in the art of this period.³ Yet the presence of riverine infrastructure in, or its influence on, the landscape is rarely discussed. Camille Pissarro's depictions of the Oise River offer a rich entry point to consider how these interventions radically altered the nature of these waterways and how the changed environment was approached by artists, which is to say, the ecocritical possibilities afforded by these images. I place Pissarro's pictures within the context of the infrastructure projects executed along the river and in dialogue with the naturalist approach of Charles-François Daubigny to this same river.

² Émile Zola, *L'oeuvre* (Paris: G. Charpentier et Cie, 1886), 429: "Plus de jolis coins, plus de ruelles mouvantes où se perdre, un désastre à étrangler tous les ingénieurs de la marine!" Lantier further exclaimed at the loss of a specific island: "Tiens! ce bouquet de saules qui émergent encore, à gauche, c'était le Barreux, l'île où nous allions causer dans l'herbe, tu te souviens?...Ah! les misérables!" (Here! This cluster of willow trees that are still visible, to the left, it was the Barreux, the island where we went to chat in the grass, you remember? Ah! The wretches!).

³ The work done by art historians like T.J. Clark, Richard Brettell, and Robert Herbert is foundational for placing river landscapes within the social matrix of working-class labor, bourgeois leisure, and the spreading influence of Paris. See Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1984); Brettell and Scott Schaefer, *A Day in the Country: Impressionism and the French Landscape* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in association with The Art Institute of Chicago and Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1984); and Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). Recently, scholars like Maura Coughlin and John Ribner have begun to employ ecocritical and environmentally focused approaches to surface the effects industrialization had on the environment and in what ways artist's explicitly or implicitly represented these effects in their work. See Coughlin, "Biotopes and Ecozones: Slippery Images on the Edge of the French Atlantic," *Landscapes: The Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language* 7, no. 1 (2016): 1–23; and Ribner, "The Poetics of Pollution," in *Turner, Whistler, Monet: Impressionist Visions*, ed. Katharine Lochnan (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, in association with Tate Publishing, London, 2004), 51–63.

This environmentally-oriented framework brings into focus how Pissarro's work registered the river as no longer a purely natural space, but rather one of human intervention, where the organic forces of nature are entangled with human, and civil engineers in particular, desire for control.

Canalization of the Oise (1827–1843)

Like the Seine, the Oise River (Figure 3) was an important waterway for the transportation of goods in the nineteenth century. Even though villages like Pontoise were just a quick one-hour train ride from Paris as early as 1847, the river remained the preferred method of transport.⁴ It spans a little over two hundred miles from its source near the Belgian city of Chimay to where it joins the Seine at Andrésy. Barges brought hundreds of tons of foodstuffs and products—like cereal grains, wood, coal, and leather—from the valley of the Oise to Paris.⁵

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the river's characteristics also made the reliable transportation of these goods increasingly difficult. While it benefited from a steady flow of water, the Oise typically had a shallow depth, a rapid current, sections with high shoals, and intermittent towing paths. Islands and old bridges with low arches presented further hindrances to navigation. All these factors made journeys down river to the confluence with the Seine perilous and trips upriver arduous. Seasonal variations brought further challenges: with alternating periods of low water and high flood waters, or blockages due to ice flows, navigation on the river was only possible for around half of the year.⁶

To overcome these challenges the Oise was canalized, a method of river management that aims to improve navigation by regulating the flow of water. In nineteenth-century France, this was primarily achieved with a pair of structures—a *barrage*, or dam, (either fixed or moveable) to control the level of the water and an *écluse*, or lock, to provide passage for vessels.⁷ These lock-and-dam pairs subdivided a waterway into a series of level segments, called reaches, which gradually lower stepwise along a river's length to alleviate any change

4 Paul Dupont, *Le guide des chemins de fer et des bateaux à vapeur et de toutes les voies de communication de France et de l'étranger*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie administrative et des chemins de fer de Paul Dupont, 1847), 4. During this period the "Pontoise" station was located at Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône. It was not until a new cast-iron bridge was built over the Oise, in 1863, that rail service arrived in Pontoise itself, see Richard R. Brettell, *Pissarro and Pontoise: The Painter in a Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 20; and Adolphe Laurent Joanne, *Les environs de Paris illustrés* (Paris: L. Hachette et cie, 1868), 265.

5 Joanne, *Les environs de Paris*, 268.

6 Claude Legout, «Histoire de la canalisation de l'Oise de 1830 à nos jours: De L'Isle-Adam à Andrésy,» *Mémoires de la société historique et archéologique de Pontoise, du Val-d'Oise et du Vexin* 94 (2012), 176.

7 Other methods of water control were used as well, to a lesser extent. For a discussion of all the various techniques available to French engineers in the nineteenth century, see Charles Talansier, "Travaux publics, La canalisation des fleuves, But et utilité, historique, la Seine," *Le génie civil*, serialized article (Nov. 3, 10, and 17, 1889).

in elevation.⁸ The water level was further regulated with a *déversoir* (or weir), a type of low, fixed dam installed in a non-navigable section of a river that acted like a release valve during periods of high water.

The canalization of the Oise began in 1827 and stretched from the upriver village of Compiègne to the river's confluence with the Seine. Seven dams and locks were built to achieve the engineers' goals, which included maintaining a minimum water level of six feet and managing a thirty-three-foot drop in elevation.⁹ While six of the dams were built quickly, within the first five years, the construction planned for the last site at Pontoise was more complex. Structures were built on either side of the Île Saint-Martin and the engineer's plan for the site shows how they bracketed the island (Figure 4). Work began first on the masonry weir, which was built on the Pontoise side. Its chevron shape helped to direct the path of the water, which is clearly visible in a late nineteenth-century postcard of the site (Figure 5). Downriver, on the Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône side of the island, a trio of structures comprising a lock, a fixed dam, and a sluice gate (another tool for controlling the flow of water) were erected.¹⁰ Due to the complexity of these structures, and to a series of financial and administrative complications, completion of this final section of the canalization was delayed until 1843.¹¹

Fluid Naturalism: Daubigny on the Oise

One of the beneficiaries of this now more navigable river was the Barbizon painter Charles-François Daubigny. In 1857, the artist famously purchased a boat that he transformed into a floating studio. Working from his *Le Bottin*, Daubigny painted his primary subject—views of rural life and nature along the Oise River around his home in Auvers—so frequently that his name became synonymous with the waterway. The artist also piloted *Le Bottin* along other tributaries, and on the Seine

8 François Beaudouin, «La canalisation de la Seine par barrages mobiles éclusés au XIXe siècle,» *Bulletin de l'Association des Amis du Musée de la Batellerie* 2 (Dec.1988), 3–6; and Leveson Francis Vernon-Harcourt, *Treatise on Rivers and Canals, Relating to the Control and Improvement of Rivers and the Design, Construction and Development of Canals*, vol. 1: Text (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882), 39–40.

9 Legout, «Histoire de la canalisation,» 187. The navigable depth was increased from 1.8 to 2 meters in 1850 and then to 2.2 meters in 1880, which allowed even heavier, three-hundred-ton barges to pass.

10 On the engineer's plan for the placement of the structures at the Île Saint-Martin, the dam is labeled *deversoir* like the weir on the upstream side. This is perhaps because the structure was a fixed dam rather than moveable one. In other archival documents, the structure accompanying the lock is referred to as a *barrage*, or dam, see Préfecture du Département de Seine-et-Oise, *Ouvrages à exécuter pour la construction d'une écluse et d'un barrage dans la rivière d'Oise, auprès de Pontoise*, April 4, 1834, Box 3S1 32, Archives Départementales du Val d'Oise, Pontoise, France.

11 Legout, «Histoire de la canalisation,» 187–93; and Bernard Le Sueur, «Navigations d'Oise,» *Annales historiques compiégnoises: Études picardes modernes et contemporaines* 16, no. 55–56 (Winter 1993/94), 50–53. Other projects were completed at Pontoise, and elsewhere along the river, in the decades that followed this initial canalization project to accommodate the need for ever-larger, barges carrying heavier loads.

itself, during his many summer painting campaigns.¹² On one such trip, the riverside village of Glouton, with its chain-operated ferry, caught his attention (Figure 6). Working from his studio-boat afforded Daubigny a low vantage point that immersed him in the river's environment, such that the Seine fills the foreground, stretches past the village, and off into the distance. Along the bank, the flat-bottom ferry rests awaiting the cattle that are being coaxed onboard. While there is no suggestion here of industrialization or the fluvial interventions of civil engineers, it is worth remembering that to even reach this spot on the Seine from his home at Auvers, Daubigny would have navigated through the recently completed lock at Pontoise and two others on the Seine.¹³

The structures regulating the Oise and the Seine go unrecognized in Daubigny's many riverine landscapes. Indeed, like his bucolic view of Glouton, his river paintings are instead characterized by a sort of fluid, *longue durée* naturalism; a tranquil vision of the natural world, untouched by industrialization, that was increasingly sought after by a steady stream of buyers wanting to escape the bustle of urban life.¹⁴ The critic Zacharie Astruc calls attention to this aspect of the artist's work in his 1859 Salon review, remarking that "the realism, —excuse me, —the nature of Mr. Daubigny is charming and pleases everyone...[his] pure image of the rustic world delights the eye at the same time that it calms the overworked imagination, simplifies the dream, and gives the soul a chaste interior peace which delivers it from the

annoyances of our active life."¹⁵ Casting Daubigny's approach to nature instead as one of a disinterested observer, Théophile Gautier suggested in his review that "He does not choose, he does not compose, he neither adds nor subtracts, he does not mix his personal feelings with the reproduction of the site... his paintings are pieces of nature cut out and set into a golden frame."¹⁶

Gautier's hyperbolic statement reveals his excitement to welcome this new revolution in French painting—one that unseated the emotional intensity and extremes of nature of the Romantics, with a direct observation of nature that elevated landscape to new prominence. For his river views, however, Daubigny of course chose and composed his scenes. In his view of the Oise at the National Gallery of Art in London (Figure 7), for example, we can clearly see evidence of alterations the artist made to the composition.¹⁷ Here thin strips of riverbank bracket the wide expanse of the river. On the right, a raft of waterlilies, a well-known feature of the river around Auvers, invites the viewer into the picture and to a washerwoman who dips a cloth into the water.¹⁸ Likely begun *en plein air* on his studio boat, Daubigny later reworked the composition back in his landbound studio. He extensively altered the right bank of the river, moving it, the tree, and the washerwoman further to the right. Due to an unfortunate early overcleaning of the painting, we can see these changes with our naked eye (Figure

12 See Robert Hellebranth, *Charles-François Daubigny, 1817–1878* (Morges: Editions Matute, 1976), xi–xiii, for a chronology of Daubigny's many trips along the Seine and its tributaries. His summer sojourns included trips along the Marne in 1864 and the Yonne in 1874.

13 On the Seine, Daubigny would have travelled through locks at Denouval and at Meulan on his way to Glouton. See Auguste Boulé, "Le barrage de Suresnes et la canalisation de la Seine entre Paris et Rouen," *Congrès international de l'utilisation des eaux fluviales*, 22–27 juillet 1889 (Paris: Librairie Polytechnique, Beaudry et Cie, 1889), 21–22; and Edward Thorpe, *The Seine: From Havre to Paris* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), 19–20.

14 Lynne Ambrosini, "The Market for Daubigny's Landscapes, or 'The best pictures do not sell,'" in *Daubigny, Monet, Van Gogh: Impressions of Landscape*, eds. Lynne Ambrosini, Frances Fowle and Maite van Dijk (Cincinnati: Taft Museum of Art, 2016), 81–92. For a study of the market for landscape painting in the mid-nineteenth century more generally, see Nicholas Green, "Dealing in Temperaments: Economic Transformation of the Artistic Field in France during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Art History* 10, no. 1 (March 1987): 59–78. Maura Coughlin has pointed to a similar phenomenon in naturalists' approaches to the French coastline in the mid-nineteenth century, when fishing villages were being overrun by tourists and turned into seaside resorts. In Coughlin's estimation, these works tend to resort to "the patronizing, nostalgic and unproductive language of primitivism," see Coughlin, "Shifting Baselines, or Reading Art through Fish," in *Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture*, eds. Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 145–157.

15 Zacharie Astruc, *Les 14 stations du Salon Août 1859* (Paris: Poulet Malassis et Debroise, 1859), 303: "Le réalisme, —pardon, —la nature de M. Daubigny est charmante et plaît à tous. Cette image pure du monde rustique en même temps qu'elle charme les yeux, repose l'imagination exaltée, simplifie le rêve et donne à l'âme une chaste paix intérieure qui la délivre des importunités de notre vie active." Speaking specifically about one of Daubigny's submissions to this Salon (p. 306)—*The Banks of the Oise* (1859; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux)—Astruc thought it showed promise but that the artist had yet to realize his full talent: "On y constate les défaillances du talent de M. Daubigny qui n'est pas encore sûr de ses effets et tâtonne par défaut d'organisation précise." (One observes there the failure of Mr. Daubigny's talent, who is not yet sure of his effects and by default gropes for precise organization.)

16 Théophile Gautier, "Salon de 1859," *Exposition de 1859*, eds. Wolfgang Drost and Ulrike Hennings (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992), 192: "Il ne choisit pas, il ne compose pas, il n'ajoute ni n'élague, il ne mêle pas son sentiment personnel à la reproduction du site...ses tableaux sont des morceaux de nature coupés et entourés d'un cadre d'or."

17 This example is far from unique in the artist's career. As René Boitelle has noted in his study of the artist's later painting techniques, Daubigny often made significant changes to a composition or in some cases completely painted over previous, unfinished pictures. See Boitelle, "Tout dans son talent est prime-sautier, sain, ouvert: Observations on Daubigny's Late Painting Techniques," in *Daubigny, Monet, Van Gogh: Impressions of Landscape*, eds. Lynne Ambrosini, Frances Fowle and Maite van Dijk (Cincinnati: Taft Museum of Art, 2016), 131–151.

18 In an article on the artist, the writer Charles Yriarte described the features of the Oise and the waterlilies in particular: « ...et de grandes nappes de nénufars font des premiers plans charmants à ces tableaux tout faits et devant lesquels le peintre n'a qu'à s'asseoir, la parasol fiché en terre, la boîte à couleurs sur les genoux. » (a great blanket of water-lilies make charming foregrounds to these ready-made pictures and in front of which the painter has only to sit down, with his umbrella stuck in the ground and his box of colors on his knees). Yriarte, "Courrier de Paris," *Le monde illustré* (June 27, 1868), 403.

8).¹⁹ The flesh tone of the washerwoman and the blue of her cloth can be seen further to the left as can the original tree, still visible through the lighter paint of the sky.

Daubigny often used his oil sketches as a reference for pictures that were worked later entirely in his studio, like for the view of the Oise he exhibited at the Salon of 1863 (Figure 9). Rather than washerwomen working, here local villagers relax on the riverbank, their bright red and yellow hats stand out against the lush green surroundings. In this case, a Salon critic suggested that the artist was more concerned with pleasing his collectors than with forwarding the agenda of naturalism. He lamented that in Daubigny's better pictures one finds an artist who "goes straight to the simple, to the broad, and achieves greatness by a sobriety of means," whereas in this picture there is "another Daubigny that the crowd understands more easily and likes better: the one who makes a considerable number of the *Banks of the Oise* in a soft grey tone, or else small appealing farms, with pleasant clusters of trees. That painter, we leave to the dealers of the rue Laffitte ..."²⁰

Whether aiming to please his collectors or his own artistic eye, Daubigny was participating in the construction of a certain kind of landscape. More than "pieces of nature cut out and set into a golden frame," his river landscapes present the fiction of a natural world and rural life that remained untouched by modernity, what Nicholas Green has termed a "spectacle of nature," to be consumed visually by the Parisian bourgeoisie.²¹ To achieve this, Daubigny's editing eye not only selected subjects that avoided evidence of the rapid industrialization underway along the rivers he explored in his *Le Bottin*, he also underplayed how infrastructure projects had changed the nature of the river itself. Nevertheless, even before the artist decided to move the riverbank in his oil sketch, the interventions made by river engineers had already changed the waterway's width, depth, and speed to benefit humanity's needs.

Pissarro's River: Infrastructure and Impressions of Nature

It was in Daubigny's views of the Oise, like the one he showed at the 1863 Salon, that Camille Pissarro found inspiration. The artist's earliest experiments with river landscapes coincided with a growing distance between

19 Larry Keith and Raymond White, "Mixed Media in the Work of Charles-François Daubigny," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 23 (2002), 46–47. The authors are careful to note that the overcleaning occurred before the picture was bequeathed to the museum in 1928.

20 Jules-Antoine Castagnary, *Salons: 1857–1870*, vol. 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1892), 145: "...allant droit au simple, au large, et atteignant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens...Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gris un nombre considérable de bords de l'Oise, ou bien de petites fermes séduisantes, avec des bouquets d'arbres agréables. Celui-là, nous le laissons aux marchands de la rue Laffitte, n'est-ce pas, maître?" See also Ambrosini, "The Market for Daubigny's Landscapes," 90.

21 Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). For Green (p. 3), "nature" is not a pre-existing given, but should rather be understood as "a social and cultural construct specific to a particular material situation."

himself and his teacher and mentor, Camille Corot. His view of the Marne at Chennevières (1864/65; Scottish National Gallery), for example, is composed in a manner seemingly to evoke, and therefore please, Daubigny.²² The elder painter was on the Salon jury at the time and was an active advocate for such vanguard landscape painters. He advocated for the acceptance of Pissarro's picture of the Marne to the 1865 Salon and the following year successfully campaigned again on Pissarro's behalf, over the objections of Corot.²³ That same year, 1866, Pissarro moved to Pontoise, no doubt to be close to his new champion and to the picturesque river views Daubigny had made so famous.

Pissarro's time in Pontoise was one of the most productive and pictorially diverse of his career. During the roughly twelve years he spent there, he produced around 300 paintings, along with countless drawings, pastels, and prints.²⁴ In his study of Pissarro's time in Pontoise, Richard Brettell suggests that we should understand the artist's approach to his choice of subjects as one of a "visual historian," painting everything from aspects of traditional rural life and activity on the river to the contrasting economies of agriculture and industrial factories.²⁵ However, we should not take this to mean that the artist was indiscriminate. Indeed, while Pissarro's attention extended to the relatively new railway bridge, it seems that he did not find the train station, which was inaugurated in 1870, worthy of his visual record.²⁶

Pissarro did find inspiration in the modernized riverine environment around the lock, dam, and weir bracketing the Île Saint-Martin, depicting them in a trio of pictures.²⁷ The artist first approached the subject of the weir in 1868 (Figure 10). Standing on the riverbank on the Pontoise side, he focused on the spot where the Oise splits into two arms to flow around the island. In the background, barges clog the waterway on the upriver side of the lock. Tufted, dark-green trees line the path that leads to the village of Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône in

22 His extensive use of a palette knife further reveals his interest in the work of Gustave Courbet. On the influence both artists had on Pissarro see Kermit Swiler Champa, *Studies in Early Impressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 70–71.

23 See Joachim Pissarro and Claire Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, *Pissarro: Critical Catalogue of Paintings*, with Alexia de Buffévent and Annie Champié, trans. Mark Hutchinson and Michael Taylor, vol. 1 (Paris: Wildenstein Institute Publications, 2005), 118, 121.

24 Claire Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, "Pontoise: 1866–1869, 1872–1882," in Pissarro and Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, *Pissarro: Critical Catalogue of Paintings*, vol. 2, p. 97.

25 Brettell, *Pissarro and Pontoise*, 158–59.

26 For Pissarro's depiction of the newly constructed railway bridge, see Brettell, *Pissarro and Pontoise*, 67. This exclusion of the train station is notable because the artist painted other new buildings in and around Pontoise, like the Châlon factory that opened in 1872. Also, later in his career, the exterior of the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris featured in a series of painting, see Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro, *The Impressionist and the City: Pissarro's Series Paintings*, ed. Mary Anne Stevens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 51–59.

27 The weir on the Pontoise side is also visible in a sweeping view of river by the artist—*Banks of the Oise at Pontoise* (1872; Private collection, Chicago). In that case, river infrastructure is less the primary subject of the picture than one of the many effects of the industrializing of Pontoise.

the background, which disappears behind the tree-covered island. The other arm of the river fills the foreground. Here the blue, gray, and green of the relatively calm water shifts to a flurry of white and cream as it rushes over the weir. Thanks to its chevron shape, and our perspective, as the weir extends towards us, only a dark line of its upper most ridge is visible creating a strong diagonal that mirrors that of the receding village in the background.

Pissarro returned to the subject several years later, in 1872, when he settled again in Pontoise following a stay in London during the Franco-Prussian war (Figure 1). Compared with his earlier attempt, Pissarro employed a brighter palette and a looser handling for his second version. With short brushstrokes of luminous whites, greys, and blues, he was able to convey more vividly the impression of shimmering light on the water's surface. Pissarro also made significant changes to the compositional layout. He raised the lower edge of the foreground, lowered the horizon line, and generally extended the scene across a wider canvas, which, together with the strong horizontal geometry of the composition, offers a more panoramic view. A consequence of this new framing is that the weir in the foreground is far less readable.²⁸ The strong diagonal of the underlying masonry structure was truncated to a strange and seemingly disconnected thick dark line. What does carry over is the weir's turbulent effect on the water, which remains a key focus in both versions.

The third picture features the dam and lock on the Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône side (Figure 11). Standing again on the opposite bank, Pissarro experimented with a dynamic new composition. In the middle ground, barges laden with goods congest the upriver side of the lock. On the far right, another can be seen either entering or exiting the lock itself, the barge's flag-topped mast is visible extending upward behind the stone wall of the lock. Here the river curves around the island and Pissarro's clever choice of framing results in the straightening

of the otherwise diagonal dam to create a strong horizontal in the foreground. With this frontal perspective, the artist was able to render the water as it rushed through the dam, its armature still visible at the top, and the resulting frothy-white rapids below.

It is difficult to know Pissarro's intention for undertaking these subjects. The pictures clearly exemplify his shifting artistic approach away from the muted colors of the Barbizon towards the brighter palette and broken brushwork that would later be the hallmarks of the Impressionists. With his selection of site, Pissarro arguably aligns the river itself with other signs of modernity—like riverside factories and new railroad bridges—that were equally a part of the “visual history” of his time in Pontoise. Perhaps he thought such subjects would be appealing to his new art dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, and to his growing number of supporters, who were seeking a different perspective on nature than the one Daubigny was presenting for his collectors.²⁹ Can we also read an ecological message in these works?

Stephen Eisenman has suggested this as an approach for understanding Pissarro's *Cart with Logs* (1862/63; Hecht Museum, Haifa)—an early oil sketch that depicts workers loading the thin, straight trunks of pine trees onto a horse-drawn cart. For Eisenman, the sketch reveals the artist's concern with the widespread disappearance of oak trees from the forest of Fontainebleau in favor of this fast-growing construction material.³⁰ He argues that while Pissarro was not a prominent voice in the campaign to save the forest, like Théodore Rousseau, concern over the deforestation was widespread among the Barbizon group.³¹

In Pissarro's trio of pictures of the weir and dam bracketing the Île Saint-Martin, I think it is possible to approach the works with what Andrew Patrizio has called an “ecological eye,”

28 This formal decision is perhaps in part what led to the confusion in the early twentieth century about how to title the work. It was not exhibited in the artist's lifetime and whether this was one of the pictures bought by the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in 1872 is not certain. It was sold in 1900 with the title *Les Chalands au bord de la rivière* (*The Barges by the River*), see Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, *Tableaux modernes, pastels, aquarelles, dessins* (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, June 11, 1900), p. 60–61, lot no. 60. Today, the Cleveland Museum of Art uses the title *The Lock at Pontoise*, one given by the 1939 catalogue raisonné that incorrectly identifies this view. The most recent, 2005 catalogue raisonné corrects this error and instead uses the title *Le Déversoir de Pontoise* (*The Weir at Pontoise*), see Pissarro and Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, *Pissarro: Critical Catalogue of Paintings*, vol. 2, p. 199, no. 243.

29 *Bord de l'Oise à Pontoise* (1872; Private collection, Chicago), for example, was bought almost immediately by Durand-Ruel on November 12, 1872, who then quickly sold it to the influential Impressionist collector Ernest Hoschedé on April 28, 1873, see Anne Distel, “Some Pissarro Collectors in 1874,” in *Studies on Camille Pissarro*, ed. Christopher Lloyd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 71–72n60. Pissarro met Durand-Ruel in London where they both fled during the Franco-Prussian war. Pissarro sold at least four pictures to his new dealer while he was there, see John Zarobell, “Durand-Ruel and the Market for Modern Art, from 1870–1873,” in *Discovering the Impressionists: Paul Durand-Ruel and the New Painting*, ed. Sylvie Patry (London: National Gallery Company, 2015), 87–88.

30 Stephen Eisenman, “From Corot to Monet: The Ecology of Impressionism,” in *From Corot to Monet: The Ecology of Impressionism*, ed. Stephen Eisenman (Milano: Skira, 2010), 24.

31 Rousseau petitioned Emperor Napoleon III in 1852 to establish a nature preserve in the forest, which was later achieved in 1861. On Rousseau and the deforestation of Fontainebleau, see Greg M. Thomas, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Eisenman also suggests that Pissarro may have been familiar with the work of contemporary geographer and social ecologist (and fellow anarchist) Elisée Reclus, Eisenman, “From Corot to Monet: The Ecology of Impressionism,” 20.

or with an environmental reorientation.³² As we have seen, the canalization of the Oise significantly altered the natural state of the river. With Pissarro's focus on these elements of river infrastructure, he countered Daubigny's *longue durée*, geological view of the river, by stressing the impact the projects had on the environment and how engineers were exploiting this natural resource.³³ In so doing, he offered an alternate view of the river, shifting it to the human timescale of immediacy and quotidian events, what French historian Fernand Braudel has termed the *événements*.³⁴

As an environmental record of how these projects changed the nature of the river—to one that was more predictable, regulated, and navigable—Pissarro's subject was almost as fleeting as the effects of light he fixed to canvas. The benefits to navigation that the initial canalization produced were themselves relatively short-lived. The growing amount of traffic on the river was soon more than the locks could handle, leading to the kind of congestion we can see in Pissarro's pictures. To address this issue, a new lateral canal with an additional, larger lock (a *grande écluse*) was constructed in the 1890s.³⁵ This was followed by the demolition of the weir and a large section of the Île Saint-Martin to make way for a newer and more efficient style of dam that was completed in 1913. A general plan for this project (Figure 12) shows in a faint gray outline the weir and shape of the island as Pissarro would have seen it, along with the placement of the proposed dam, and the outline of a smaller, more streamlined version of the island. Due to the required reshaping of the island, these projects were executed much to the dismay of the residents. Numerous objections to the project were noted during a public comment period, including one letter in which the author claimed that "It is worth remember that the Île Saint Martin has one of the most beautiful thickets of trees and greenery on the Oise River."³⁶

Returning then to Pissarro's pictures of the public works bracketing the Île Saint-Martin, whether his interest in these subjects was purely formal, whether he thought they might strike a particular chord with his new dealer and growing group of followers, or whether he aimed to communicate a deeper ecological message, what is clear is that where Daubigny suppressed evidence of the river as an anthropogenic space, Pissarro confronted it. Approaching his depictions of the river infrastructure at Pontoise with an environmentally-oriented framework allows us to move beyond Pissarro's rendering of the ephemeral effects of light reflected on the water's surface to acknowledge how the canalization campaign altered the Oise River. Like Lantier in Zola's novel, Pissarro recognized how canalization was changing the Oise. His rendering of the turbulent, white-frothy water that these structures created, with animated brushwork and pure unmixed paint, literally foregrounds the interventions made by engineers who were trying to control the river by remaking it.

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32 Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019). My approach to Pissarro's work is equally influenced by Maura Coughlin who has looked to art depicting the nineteenth-century French Atlantic coastline for their "ecocritical possibilities," see, for example, Coughlin, "Shifting Baselines, or Reading Art through Fish," 145–157.

33 The *longue durée*, and related concepts like geologic or natural time, are often mentioned in discussions of landscapes by Barbizon and Impressionist artists. Stephen Eisenman, for example, finds in Pissarro's work "conflicting measures of time and modes of production...the *longue durée* of geography and geology (erosion, the course of rivers, the creation and exhaustion of the soil) versus the brief and halting time of human intercourse (the length of a conversation of a walk from farm to market) [or] the hurry-up time of industry..." see Eisenman, "From Corot to Monet: The Ecology of Impressionism," 17–18.

34 For these frameworks for the analysis of history, see Fernand Braudel, "La *longue durée*," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 13, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1958), 725–53, who sets out a three-tiered conception of historical time comprising the *longue durée*, *conjuncture* (a middle term of decades), and *événements*.

35 There were seven new *grandes écluses* in all, each placed in new diversion (or "lateral") canals dug alongside the existing infrastructure, Legout, «Histoire de la canalisation," 188–89.

36 Letter from the Société historique du Vexin, June 12, 1907, Archives municipales, Ville de Pontoise, 3O 3: "Il est bon de rappeler que l'île St. Martin est l'un des plus beaux massifs d'arbres et de verdure de la rivière d'Oise."

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Figure 1. Camille Pissarro, *The Weir at Pontoise*, 1872, oil on fabric, 53 x 83 cm (20 7/8 x 32 11/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund, 1990.7.



Figure 2. Gustave Caillebotte, *Fishermen on the Seine*, 1888, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Private collection.

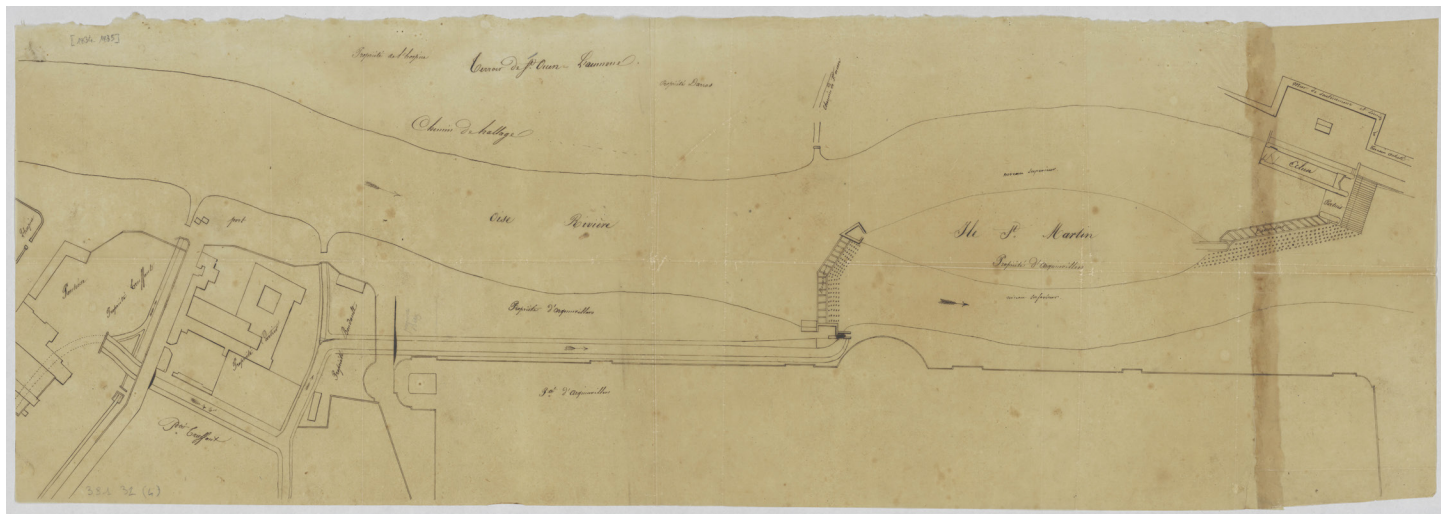


Figure 4. Plan for the placement of the lock and dam at Pontoise, 1834–35. Archives départementales du Val-d’Oise, 3S1 32(4).



Figure 5. A late nineteenth-century postcard showing the weir on the Pontoise side of the Île Saint-Martin. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 6. Charles-François Daubigny, *River Scene*, 1859. Oil on panel, 36.2 x 65.4 cm (14 1/4 x 25 3/4 in.). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of William H. Herriman, 21.134.



Figure 7. Charles-François Daubigny, *View on the Oise*, 1873, oil on wood, 38.8 x 67 cm. National Gallery of Art, London, NG6323.

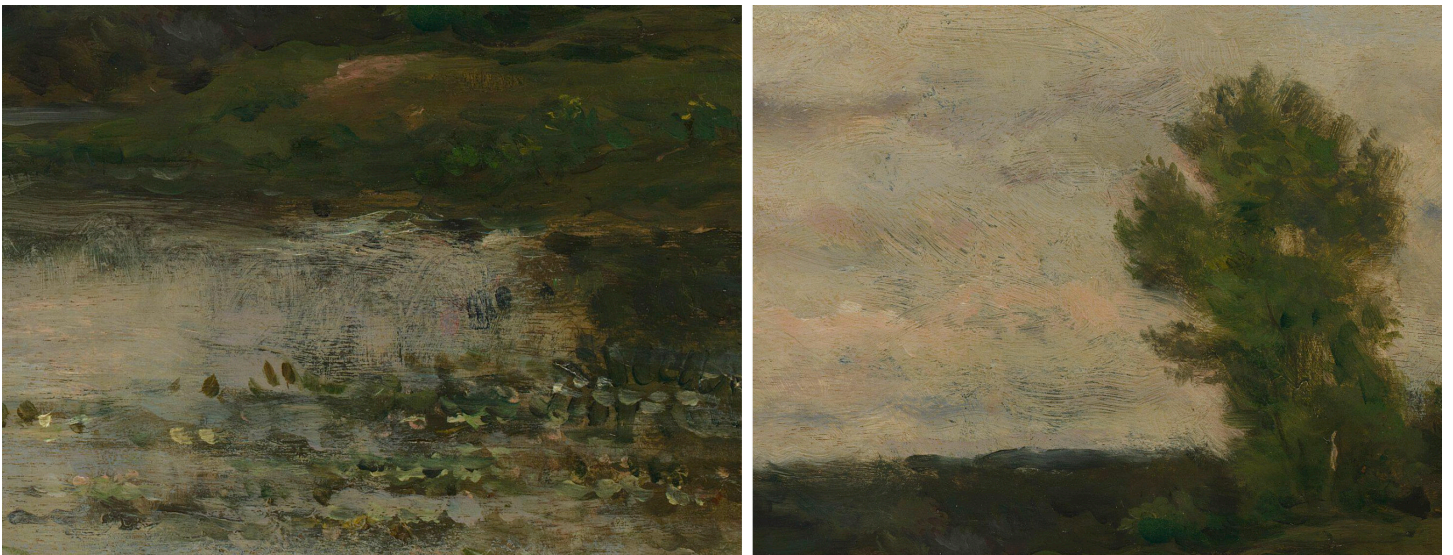


Figure 8. Details of Daubigny's *View on the Oise* (1873) showing changes the artist made to the placement of the washerwoman and the tree on the right bank.



Figure 9. Charles-François Daubigny, *Banks of the Oise Auvers*, 1863, oil on canvas, 88.9 x 161.3 cm. St. Louis Art Museum, 84:2007.



Figure 10. Camille Pissarro, *The Weir at Pontoise*, c. 1868, oil on canvas, 58.5 x 72 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.



Figure 11. Camille Pissarro, *The Dam and the Lock at Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône*, 1872, oil on canvas, 38.1 x 54.6 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Artefact/Alamy Stock Photo.

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