DeLouche on Lees, editor (2018)


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This catalogue was published to accompany the exhibition *Innovative Impressions: Prints by Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro* at the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma (9 June–9 September 2018). This original exhibition examines the work of arguably the most prominent *peintres-graveurs* of the Impressionist movement: Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), Edgar Degas (1834–1917), and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903). This term *peintres-graveurs*, likely coined in the early nineteenth century, described artists who worked in both painting and printmaking and who used them to create images of their own invention rather than copying from other media. The exhibition expands these ideas of exchange, synthesis, and invention to look at the collaborations between three Impressionist painter-printmakers. Considering their differences in nationality, education, gender, politics, class, and religious persuasion, Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro may seem like an unlikely trio. However, these three Impressionists developed significant bodies of printed work, dedicated considerable efforts to printmaking, and expanded the boundaries of the medium often in tandem with each other. This is the first exhibition to consider in-depth the prints of these three artists together.

The catalogue opens with Richard Brettell’s very brief study of artistic collaboration. He sketches a broad history of artists working together. From the Middle Ages through the sixteenth century, artists often worked in the studio as apprentices for a master. As Brettell notes, these groups were hierarchical and these exchanges cannot be considered as artistic interaction among equals. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw artists coming together to solve aesthetic and representational problems, like the three Le Nain brothers and the art academy run by the Carracci family. Fast-forwarding to the nineteenth century, Brettell surveys several case studies of collaborations between the reproductive and one-of-a-kind arts. For instance, he considers the team of painters and photographers in Arras in the 1850s experimenting with the *cliché-verre*, a combination of etching or painting and photography in which the artist draws on a transparent surface and then transfers the image onto light-sensitive paper. Brettell mentions the cross-fertilization of technical and aesthetic ideas between these painters and photographers, as well as the impossibility of attributing the prints to a single artist.

Brettell underscores the problems often plaguing monographic approaches, which can isolate artists from the larger social and cultural networks in which they operated. He examines critical art historical studies that helped pave the way, such as Barbara Ehrlich White’s *Impressionists Side by Side* (1996) and Joachim Pissarro’s *Cézanne/Pissarro, Johns/Rauschenberg* (2006). Brettell lays out their important contributions, such as the preeminence of primary documents to spell out the artists’ friendships and rivalries, but also their shortcomings, notably the emphasis on pairs. Such studies set up a dramatic back-and-forth between duos; hence this exhibition seeks to change this dynamic by seeing the larger network of exchange within a group.

Sarah Lees’s ninety-three-page chapter follows Brettel’s brief introduction. Her essay is an exhaustive chronological study of the three painter-printmakers from the 1870s through the 1890s. Lees convincingly lays out the patterns of exchange and innovation that occurred within this circle of Impressionist artists through the close examination of primary texts and the works themselves. For example, she notes that Degas resumed printmaking in 1875–77 after a long dry spell, at the same time that Cassatt was introduced to the group. Cassatt’s first experimentation with printmaking came at this same time. Lees believes Cassatt’s early prints, such as *Standing Nude with a Towel* (c. 1879), suggest strong parallels with Degas’s work. A critical moment in the history of Impressionist collaboration came after the close of the 1879 exhibition, when these three artists worked together most directly for the project *Le Jour et la Nuit*. Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro, along with other Impressionist colleagues, planned to contribute innovative prints to a new journal slated for publication beginning February 1880. Even though *Le Jour et la Nuit* never materialized, Cassatt, Degas, and Pissarro prepared prints for it, and Lees examines their production in detail. Lees notes that over the course of the 1870s-90s, the attention of these artists would intersect or diverge in revealing ways. For example, following the acclaimed exhibition of Japanese woodblocks in 1890, all three artists experimented with colored printmaking, if to different ends.

Lees’s chapter demonstrates profoundly the radically inventive experiments these three artists made using the medium of printmaking, often in dialogue with one another. The most powerful passages in Lees’s chapter are her visual descriptions of the prints themselves. She examines the various states of the prints, articulating the minor alterations and suggesting reasons for the adjustments. This is most notable with Degas’s aquatints and etchings *On the Stage* (1876–77).
The catalogue concludes with a comprehensive checklist of the ninety-five prints and paintings in the exhibition. The detailed list provides helpful information on all of the works, and also includes “selected references.” These references, however, are lamentably brief, usually limited to just one entry. For example, all of the listings for Bracquemond’s etchings except one reference only Henri Béraldi’s magisterial yet dated multi-volume catalogue *Les Graveurs du XIXe siècle* (1885–92).

This catalogue underscores that art is and was not made in a vacuum, but rather involves a complex of exchange, inspiration, and invention. *Innovative Impressions* itself provides an inspiring model for future studies. Other upcoming exhibitions are considering nineteenth-century artists within their larger networks, such as the forthcoming exhibition *Through Vincent’s Eyes: Van Gogh and His Sources*, opening at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in October 2020 before traveling to the Columbus Museum of Art the following year.

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