

# Rouen Port, Unloading Wood

CAMILLE PISSARRO

**This painting is a wonderful example of a great Impressionist painter fighting blindness with lighter and more luminous painting in the last decade of his life. It belongs to a series of industrialized marine subjects that Pissarro painted in Rouen in 1896 and 1898. The quayside scene was painted with a more somber, muted palette than his earlier landscapes, but like many of his urban scenes observes the comings and goings, the hustle and bustle of city life.**

## Change in subject

Known more for his tranquil rural scenes, Pissarro's paintings of Rouen in the last decade of his life marked a major change in subject matter, when with his eyesight failing he began painting views of urban life from indoors. He completed more than 300 paintings and at least as many drawings and several prints of Paris, Rouen, Le Havre and Dieppe, often in series. His city scenes had a sense of movement not seen in his previous work, but even in busy scenes such as this, every composition was planned with care and there was an underlying framework of precision. In *Rouen Port, Unloading Wood*, the careful composition brings a sense of order and stability to the bustling harbor scene. One critic said: "In his views of the Seine at Rouen he infallibly catches the right sense of movement."

## Historic city on water

Like many artists before him, Pissarro became fascinated by Rouen's historic architecture, and also in its active port, and the all-important role of the Seine's waters in the life and light of the city. He even wrote enthusiastically that the city "is as beautiful as Venice... there are marvels wherever I look!" Like Venice, Rouen was a modern working port with historic architecture and in it Pissarro saw the same magic in the relationship between water and buildings.

He stayed in the same rooms at the Hôtel d'Angleterre that Monet had stayed in previously when he worked on his Rouen Cathedral paintings. His room on the second floor overlooked the Seine and offered a fine view



SUNRISE AT ROUEN, 1898. ONE OF MANY PAINTINGS OF ROUEN BY PISSARRO

of the bustling quays and the endless stream of pedestrian and cart traffic over the nearby bridges. In a letter to his son Lucien he wrote: "I see the boats glide by with their plumes of black, yellow, white, pink smoke. I see the ships loaded with planks of wood being moored, being unloaded and going off."

He stayed here from July 1898 until October that year. On previous visits he'd concentrated on prints but now he began to paint the city in earnest, focusing on the activities that took place around the industrialized port. Soon he was working on ten paintings at once, capturing the harbor and bridges in different lights and weather conditions. It was the first of his series paintings

## Masterpiece Connection

From his arrival in Paris in 1855 until his death in 1903, Pissarro was insatiably curious about the work of his younger colleagues, particularly Paul Cézanne (pictured with Pissarro), with whom he worked and shared methods intermittently from 1872 to 1882. According to Pissarro, Pontoise, where Pissarro lived at the time, is where Cézanne "came under my influence and I his." There the older artist demonstrated his method of painting patiently from nature, which led Cézanne to change his own approach to painting.



## DID YOU KNOW?

In 2000, West Indian Nobel prize-winning poet and playwright Derek Walcott (pictured) published a poetic biography of Camille Pissarro, who was also born in the West Indies. Written in alternately rhymed couplets, *Tiepolo's Hound* is set in St. Thomas, St. Lucia and Paris. The story of the poem follows two narratives: the St. Thomas-born painter and exile, Pissarro, and Walcott himself, taking up the persona of poet and failed painter. Pissarro's strong desire in the book is to leave St. Thomas and go to Paris to pursue his vocation as a painter. Published with 25 reproductions of Walcott's own paintings, the poem is also a history in verse of Impressionist painting.



to base compositions on the theme of the River Seine and its pictorial, poetic and functional roles. The movement of the river, the passage of traffic upon it became a central aspect of his work from 1898.

Pissarro painted 20 pictures during this, his fourth stay in Rouen, eight including this one showing the commercial river traffic and waterfront activity along the quays below his hotel window. Many of these show workers on the docks, such as here where they are unloading wood. They were exciting scenes showing none of the poverty and oppression of the workers he had sometimes portrayed in earlier work.

## Return to Impressionist roots

After abandoning Neo-Impressionism in the early 1890s, Pissarro returned to his Impressionist style. His work regained its original freshness, while a greater lightness

and purity of color remained as a result of his experiments with the regularized dot, or 'divisionist' technique. This canvas shows off the spontaneity and liveliness of the typically Impressionist *alla prima* brushwork, where the marks are obvious. It also shows an extraordinary knowledge of harmony and accord. In this painting he follows the Impressionist style of using complementary colors, the pale blue sky, the pinkish-orange roofs and paving stones more subdued and chalkier than before.

Despite age and an eye disease, Pissarro maintained his great appetite for action right up until the end of his life. His dedication to his art and his encouragement to artists such as Cézanne and Gauguin to "use nature as a guide" meant that he bridged the gap between one generation of artists and the next, from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism.

## About the Artist

A key figure in the Impressionist circle, Pissarro was a bold and restless experimenter, exploring composition and subject matter as well as color and space. He was an artist who ceaselessly challenged and inspired. Every so often he would grow tired of painting the views around his home in Éragry and feel the need to travel to find new themes, but this was expensive. The artist and his family had been through some very lean times, especially during the late 1880s when Pissarro experimented with the new, but non-commercial, divisionist technique (also called pointillism); *Peasants' Houses, Éragry* (pictured) shows this new style.



But by the mid-1890s, when he'd returned to a more Impressionistic style, the art dealer Durand-Ruel was buying up most of his new work. This meant that Pissarro could pay off the debt he owed on his home and spend more time away. He moved about incessantly in search of new themes, traveling to London, Paris, Holland and Normandy, but it was the familiar port of Rouen with its cargoes on the Seine and his views of the quays and the perspectives from his window that provided the best of his inspiration.



## Name of Painting

Rouen Port, Unloading Wood

## Artist

Camille Pissarro (1830 – 1903)

## Date of Painting

Painted in 1898

## Size

29 x 36 1/4 inches or 73 x 92cm

## Technique

Oil on canvas

## Where in the World

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute,  
Massachusetts, USA

## Fascinating Fact

The hardworking Pissarro was a prolific sketcher – a conservative estimate puts the number of his drawings at over 3,000. He is said to have produced far more than his contemporaries: around four times more than Manet and twice as many as Cézanne. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in the UK has a fine collection of his drawings.



