
The Pissarro Collection at the Ashmolean comprises numerous paintings, prints, and drawings by various Pissarros, including Camille, a founding member of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements. The collection also includes an archive of family papers mostly concerning Lucien Pissarro, Camille’s eldest son. Earlier this year the Ashmolean held its first ever exhibition focusing exclusively on the Eragny Press, owned and operated by Lucien and his wife Esther. Eragny Press was an Arts and Crafts-inspired private press based in London. The Pissarros personally designed and printed thirty-two titles between 1895 and 1914.

A brief introduction and three essays accompany this exhibition catalog. The essays draw upon the rich archival sources in the Ashmolean’s collection to explore various dynamics between father and son, husband and wife, printer/publisher, and author/illustrator. In “The Art of the Eragny Press,” Jon Whiteley outlines Lucien’s artistic heritage, which combined Impressionist theories with expertise in color printing, affording Eragny Press its distinctive style of illustration. Colin Harrison’s “Choosing the Texts for the Eragny Press” explains the fairy tales, poetry, and prose printed by the Pissarros in light of publishing practices, literary fads, and pragmatic considerations. Focusing on the Pissarros’ unique domestic circumstances in “Lucien and Esther Pissarro – At Home 1894-1914,” Simon Shorvon depicts the couple as rooted in hearth and home and yet immersed in artistic, literary, and political spheres. Beyond biographical narratives, these essays contribute to an understanding of Eragny Press books as something more than exquisite specimens of privately printed books. They become complex and collaborative products – the locus of many artistic movements, of historical and modern print- and bookmaking traditions, even of French and English cultures.

Only Harrison’s essay includes footnotes, so the catalog’s selected bibliography serves more as an introductory resource. Previous publications, such as A History of the Eragny Press, 1894-1914 (Genz, 2004) and the Grolier Club’s Illustrating the Good Life: The Pissarros’ Eragny Press, 1894-1914 (Beckwith, 2007), offer more extensive bibliographies as well as indexes. This catalog does surpass other publications on the Eragny Press with its abundant high-quality color illustrations. Color printing being a hallmark of Eragny Press, this catalog reveals the Pissarros’ artistry with multiple views of individual titles, including many full-page and double-page spreads. It reproduces frontispieces, initials, illustrations, bindings, and decorative papers as well as additional artifacts from the exhibition, such as family photographs, preparatory sketches, trial prints, and wood blocks.

This slim, soft-cover volume seems to mimic an elegantly designed Eragny Press book in typeface and format, whereby the catalog’s sporadic typographical errors and occasionally awkward page layouts are a disappointment. Nonetheless, this book is recommended for academic and museum libraries, in particular those with collections focusing on the history and arts of the book.

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