

## GEORGES SEURAT

French, 1859 – 1891

Georges Seurat (pronounced SIR-AH) was a pioneering artist best known for developing a technique known as **Pointillism**, in which he utilized tiny, targeted dots of color that were intended to “blend” in the viewer’s eye. This technique underpinned the movement known as **Neo-Impressionism**, which built upon the revolutionary artistic advances introduced by Impressionism in the 1860s and 70s. Seurat’s life was brief, but in his 31 years he produced several masterpieces, including the large-scale *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884–1886), one of the enduring icons of late 19th-century painting.

Seurat was born in 1859 into a wealthy family in Paris, France, and grew up during a period of rapid industrialization and social, scientific, and political change. He studied at the famous *École des Beaux-Arts*, where he received a traditional academic training, learning to draw from casts of antique sculptures and copying paintings by Old Masters. After completing a year of military service, Seurat returned to Paris where he shared a studio with fellow artist Edmond Aman-Jean. He initially focused on mastering the art of monochrome drawing, primarily in **Conté crayon**, a type of waxy graphite pencil. He continued to use that medium to produce studies for his major paintings later.

Seurat’s work was indebted on a basic level to **Impressionism**, the pioneering art movement that revolutionized painting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century. In stark opposition to traditional academic painting, which advocated the painting of historical, religious, or mythological subjects, the Impressionists were dedicated to the portrayal of contemporary, everyday life, and leisure activities in particular. They rejected the smooth finish and dark coloration of academic paintings, instead utilizing a palette of bright colors applied on a white ground in loose, broad brushstrokes. Impressionists also pioneered the concept of completing works *en plein air* (outdoors), and were particularly concerned with capturing the fleeting effects of natural sunlight.

Seurat’s first major painting was *Bathers at Asnières* (1884), a large canvas presenting working-class men and boys relaxing on the shore of the Seine in an industrial suburb of Paris.

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Like Impressionist works, this painting reflects a scene from contemporary life; a bright, colorful palette; and a concern for capturing natural light. At this stage, Seurat had not yet developed his pioneering Pointillist technique; the brushstrokes in *Bathers at Asnières* largely reflect the choppy, loose brushstrokes of Impressionism. However, in some areas, such as the red hat worn by the boy in the water, one can detect the initial development of Pointillism. This work reflects other ways in which Seurat departed from Impressionism. The large canvas was painted not outdoors, but in his studio, after the completion of multiple studies. And, significantly, the figures and forms in the work are more sculptural and substantial than those of Impressionist works. Seurat departed from Impressionism's goal of capturing a fleeting moment in time, aiming instead to lend a timelessness to his paintings, expressed in permanence of form. He said his ambition was to "make modern people in their essential traits move about as they do on [ancient Greek] friezes and place them on canvases organized by harmonies."

In 1884, Seurat abandoned the use of earth tones and adopted a prismatic palette consisting of eleven colors chromatically arranged in the order of the spectrum. White was crucial in Seurat's palette, because he mixed it with all his colors to increase their reflective powers and better evoke a feeling of natural light. Shortly thereafter he began composing his paintings with tiny, individual dots of pure color (that is, unmixed with the exception of adding white). These dots, too small to be detected when viewed from a distance, created an overall impression of shimmering brilliance, as if he was painting with drops of light.

Seurat was fascinated by contemporary scientific ideas about color. Nineteenth-century theorists such as Michel Eugène Chevreul, Ogden Rood, and David Sutter wrote treatises on color, optical effects, and perception, adapting the research of Hermann von Helmholtz and Isaac Newton into a form accessible to non-scientists. Chevreul, a French chemist who produced a color wheel of primary and intermediary hues, exerted the most important influence on artists at the time. He discovered that two juxtaposed, slightly overlapping colors would blend to appear as a third color when seen from a distance. The discovery of this phenomenon underpinned Seurat's Pointillist technique.

The artist believed that contrasting or complementary colors merged in the viewer's eye in a process called **optical mixing**, yielding more vivid tones than could be achieved by mixing

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paint alone. He called this technique '**chromo-luminism**' or **Divisionism** (after his method of separating colors into separate dots), although it is better known today as **Pointillism**. Seurat also adopted new theories regarding form and expression, asserting that the direction of lines and the particular warmth or coolness of a color had distinct expressive effects.

Seurat's great masterpiece, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884-86), launched the movement that would become known as **Neo-Impressionism**. Artists involved with this movement, such as Seurat and his friend Paul Signac, portrayed modern urban scenes as well as landscapes and seascapes. These artists were interested in contemporary scientific research regarding optics and the perception of color, and they largely adopted Seurat's Pointillist technique of applying paint to canvas. The painting portrays a range of contemporary social classes participating in leisure activities along the river. It took Seurat two years to complete this 10-foot-wide painting in his studio, based on nearly 60 studies created on site in the park itself.

After completing this masterwork, Seurat went on to produce other influential works, including landscapes, marine scenes, and, finally, the circus and cabaret themes that dominated his last works. Although his Pointillist technique was quite revolutionary, Seurat viewed himself within the long tradition of the great academic painters of the French Salon, and initially sought a classical permanence in his works. His last major works, such as *Le Chahut* and *The Circus*, introduced a more dynamic and stylized approach, influenced by sources including caricatures and popular posters.

Seurat's life was short, but his influence was long. He died, likely of diphtheria, at the age of 31. His infant son with his model Madeleine Knobloch died shortly thereafter of the same affliction. Seurat's work influenced artists ranging from his contemporary, Paul Signac, to the Cubists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even some Pop artists of the 1960s.