

# Divisionism and Pointillism

## *Background Notes*

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(1) Georges Laurent, *Portrait of Georges Seurat*,  
1883 (Louvre)

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The term 'divisionism' refers to a method of painting developed by Seurat **(1)** and his followers during the 1880s. It involved using pure, unmixed dabs – or 'points' – of oil paint, which seen from a distance would combine in a way that emulated the brilliance of colour in nature.

The leading figure in these experiments was Georges Seurat, who from the early 1880s experimented with colour to increase the brilliance of his work. In this he was building on the achievements of the Impressionist artists a decade earlier, who had advocated outdoor painting and the use of vibrant colour and open brushwork to capture transient effects in nature. Seurat wanted to bring system to the Impressionist technique, to combine oil pigments according to a scientific understanding of how colours interact with each other and the visual impact they make on viewers.

The subject of Seurat's early masterpiece, *Bathers at Asnières* (1883–84) **(3)**, is comparable with Renoir's *La Grenouillère* **(2)** of 1869 – a scene of modern leisure in a suburb of Paris. But Seurat's aims for his painting were more ambitious, his technique more rigorous. He was moving away from Impressionist spontaneity towards a monumental, timeless form of art.



**(2) Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Grenouillère*, 1869**  
(Nationalmuseum, Stockholm)

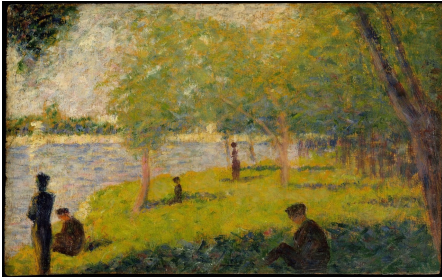


**(3) Georges Seurat, *Bathers at Asnières*, 1888**  
(National Gallery, London)

Seurat's efforts culminated in his most famous work, *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte* (1884–86) **(4)**. This monumental painting was the product of careful planning, with multiple preliminary studies and sketches **(5)**.

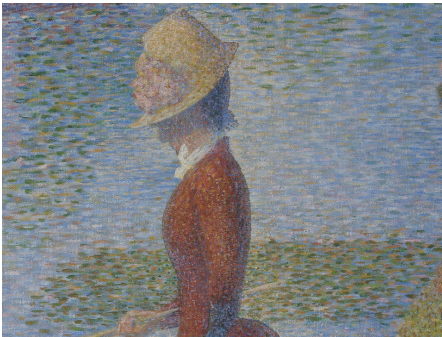


**(4) Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte*, 1884-1886** (Art Institute of Chicago)



**(5) Georges Seurat, *Study for A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte*, 1884 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)**

Seurat's technique involved the application of small, regular dots of pure colour, designed to blend in the viewer's eye. By this means he sought to intensify the brilliance of his work and create a shimmering, yet controlled effect that came as close as possible to the experience of being in a park on a sunny day.



**(4) Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte*, (detail), 1884-1886 (Art Institute of Chicago)**

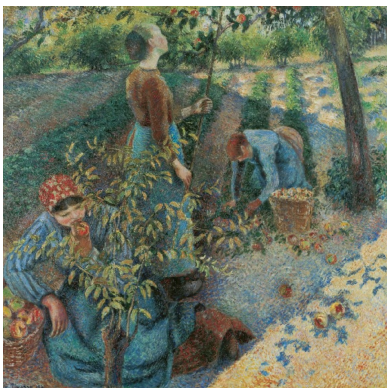
This method was informed by Seurat's study of colour theory – notably the work of scientists and writers Michel-Eugène Chevreul **(6)**, Ogden Rood, and Charles Henry. Following them, he believed that our perception of colour could be systematized and that beauty could emerge from scientific rigour. Divisionism was about more than the application of points of colour, or 'pointillism'. It was about the

systematic organisation of chromatic contrasts to generate clarity and harmony across the picture surface.



**(6) Eugène Chevreul, *Colour Wheel*, 1889 (Getty Research Institute)**

By the late 1880s Seurat had been joined by other painters including Paul Signac and Camille Pissarro. The final Impressionist exhibition of 1886 featured a significant display of their work, including *Apple Picking (7)* by Pissarro. Part of the original Impressionist group, Pissarro experimented with Divisionism for just a short period, applying its ideas and methods to his scenes of rural life. In the end, he found the discipline of Divisionist painting too restrictive, and he returned to a looser, more intuitive technique.



**(7) Camille Pissarro, *Apple Picking*, 1886 (Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki)**

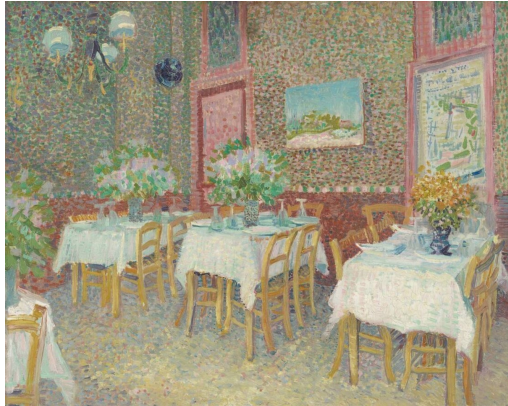
Paul Signac, on the other hand, was the most loyal and influential of Seurat's followers, emerging as Divisionism's chief theorist and practitioner after Seurat's death in 1891. His book *D' Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme* in 1899, set Divisionism within a larger art historical framework and articulated its political as well as aesthetic values. Signac believed that Divisionism could be a progressive force, advancing the cause of an egalitarian, anarchist society.



**(8) Paul Signac, *Sails and Pines*, 1896 (Private Collection)**

The seriousness of Signac's ideals is not always obvious in his paintings, particularly after he began to spend time in the South of France in the 1890s. A work like *Sails and Pines* **(8)** of 1896 presents a more relaxed, lyrical version of Seurat's meticulous art. Signac also used larger brushstrokes, sometimes reminiscent of mosaic-like tesserae, which created a stronger sense of pattern. His scenes of the Mediterranean

coastline, sun-drenched and expansive, contrast with the quiet solemnity of Seurat's urban subject. Yet they still adhere to the core aims of Divisionist art - to articulate form, space and light through pure colour.



**(9) Van Gogh, *Interior of a Restaurant*, 1887 (Kröller Müller Museum)**

Divisionism was more than a technique. It proposed that beauty could be rational, and that a method of painting could be both scientific and expressive, with colour as a new language of vision. Its ideals and methods proved to be remarkably influential. Van Gogh **(9)** experimented with Divisionism during his time in Paris (1886-8), and it found adherents outside France, notably Theo van Rysselberghe in Belgium and Giovanni Segantini in Italy. The Futurists applied the Divisionist method as befitting their devotion to progress and innovation, and Divisionism - with its emphasis on pure pigments and vibrant colour contrasts - also inspired the early experiments of Fauvist painters like Matisse and Derain. In effect, it marked a profound shift in the direction of modern art.

## Books

Marina Bocquillon-Ferretti, *Paul Signac, 1863-1935* (Met Mus, 2001)

Starr Figura et al., *Félix Fénéon: The Anarchist and the Avant-Garde* (MOMA, 2020)

Michelle Foa, *George Seurat: The Art of Vision* (Yale, 2015)

Cornelia Homburg, *Neo-Impressionism and the Dream of Realities* (Yale, 2014)

J Leighton & R Thomson et al., *Seurat and the Bathers* (National Gallery, 1997)

Richard Thomson, *Seurat* (Phaidon, 1985)

M Tompkins Lewis, *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post Impressionism* (University of California Press, 2007)

Iris Schaefer & Katja Lewerentz , *Painting Light: The Hidden Techniques of the Impressionists* (Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud ,Cologne 2008)

Heinz Widauer, ed., *Ways of Pointillism: Seurat, Signac, Van Gogh* (Hirmer, 2014)

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