- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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33-01 Neo-Impressionism

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Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, detail, 1884-1886, Art Institute of Chicago

- This is Section 27 on Neo-Impressionism and more specifically on Georges Seurat and Paul Signac the two main founders of the movement.

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Paul Signac (1863–1935), *The Dining Room (Opus 152),* 1886-87, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Paul Signac (1863–1935), *The Dining Room (Opus 152),* 1886-87, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

- The art critic **Félix Fénéon** (pronounced "fen-ay-on") **coined the term "Neo-Impressionism" in 1886** to describe this scientifically informed colour technique pioneered by Seurat and Paul Signac, which was a reaction against the more spontaneous approach of Impressionism. Paul Signac especially became a leading theorist who advocated the scientific application of colour and brushstroke to achieve harmony and luminosity in painting and he wrote a book called ***Paul Signac and Colour in Neo-Impressionism***.
- The scientific theories of optics and colour perception underlying these ideas were described by **Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889) and others**.
- Signac painted *The Dining Room*, shown here, in the dining room of his family home and depicts his mother and grandfather seated motionlessly at a table, while a maid brings the post. The painting conveys a quiet, somewhat tense domestic scene with no interaction between the figures, emphasising formality and separation.
- It is an early example of the **Pointillist** technique here, applying small dots and dabs of complementary colours—here mainly orange and blue—to create vibrant optical effects, with light streaming dramatically through a backlit window, casting strong silhouettes and contrasts. At a distance, the small dots of complementary colour mix in the eye to create a more vibrant and luminous effect by intensifying the brightness and saturation compared to mixing them on the palette which can become dull and muddied.

- **To explain the terminology**, **Neo-Impressionism** is the art movement that is based on scientific theories of colour which applied to painting was called **Divisionism**. **Pointillism** is the term used to describe applying dots or small patches of colour to the canvas. I need to add that some people use Divisionism and Pointillism interchangeably but I think it is useful to separate the theory of optical mixing Divisionism, and the application of dots of colour to the canvas, Pointillism.

NOTES

- In the latter part of the 19th century, Neo-Impressionism foregrounded the science of optics and colour to forge a new and methodical technique of painting that eschewed the spontaneity and romanticism that many Impressionists celebrated. Relying on the viewer's capacity to optically blend the dots of colour on the canvas, the Neo-Impressionists strove to create more luminous paintings that depicted modern life. With urban centres growing and technology advancing, the artists sought to capture people's changing relationship with the city and countryside. Many artists in the following years adopted the Neo-Impressionist technique of **Pointillism**, the application of tiny dots of pigment, which opened the door to further explorations of colour and eventually abstract art.
- Pointillism and Divisionism are related but distinct painting techniques that both emerged in the context of late 19th-century French painting, directly after Impressionism. Pointillism refers specifically to the process of applying tiny dots of pure, unmixed colour to a canvas, as developed by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac from 1886 onward. The viewer's eye blends these dots to create luminous effects, rather than the artist mixing pigments on the palette.[1][6]
- Divisionism, sometimes called chromoluminarism, is the scientific colour theory underlying the movement. Here, artists separate colours into individual dots or small strokes, applied side-by-side with attention to colour harmony, allowing the eye to optically blend colour for maximum vibrancy and luminosity. Divisionism emphasises the technical and theoretical side — how colours can be “divided” — while Pointillism describes the actual dot-based brushwork visible in paintings. Divisionism can use different shapes or types of mark, not just dots.[4][5]
- Both terms emerged because critics needed to distinguish the unique technique and scientific thinking from Impressionism. Seurat pioneered the

method and theory, with Signac closely following; other key artists include Camille and Lucien Pissarro, Henri-Edmond Cross, Théo van Rysselberghe, and even Henri Matisse in his early years. The names "Pointillism" and "Divisionism" are often used interchangeably, but the distinction lies in technique versus theory, and in dots versus broader brush marks.[2][1][4]

Colour Theories

- The colour theories that influenced Neo-Impressionist artists were primarily based on scientific studies of optics and colour perception from the 19th century. The foundational figure was **Michel-Eugène Chevreul**, who formulated the **Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colours in** his 1839 book ***The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours***. This law explained how colours affect the perception of adjacent colours, a principle essential to the optical mixing technique used by Neo-Impressionists.
- Other important contributors included physicist **Ogden Rood**, whose *Modern Chromatics* discussed how the human eye blends adjacent colours, and **David Suter**, who in *Phenomena of Vision* (1880) established rules linking painting to scientific observation of vision.
- **Georges Seurat integrated these theories** into a systematic painting method he called **Chromoluminarism**, later known as **Divisionism**. Neo-Impressionists, notably Seurat and Paul Signac, used these colour theories to apply dots or small brush strokes of pure pigment side-by-side, so that the viewer's eye optically blends them, achieving luminous, vibrant colour effects.
- Art critic **Félix Fénéon coined the term "Neo-Impressionism" in 1886** to describe this scientifically informed colour technique pioneered by Seurat and Signac, which was a reaction against the more spontaneous approach of Impressionism. Signac especially became a leading theorist who advocated the scientific application of colour and brushstroke to achieve harmony and luminosity in painting.

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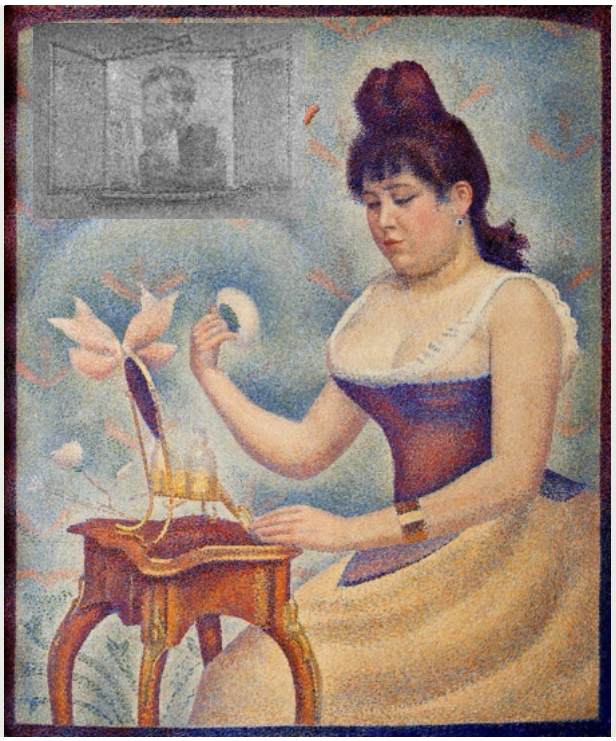

Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *Young Woman Powdering Herself*, 1889–1890, 95.5 x 79.5 cm, Courtauld Gallery, London

Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *Young Woman Powdering Herself*, 1889–1890, 95.5 x 79.5 cm, Courtauld Gallery, London

- That was a work by Paul Signac but I will start with six major works by Georges Seurat and return to Signac later.
- I normally begin with a **self-portrait** but there is no known portrait by him. His only self-portrait is **hidden** beneath this painting, *Young Woman Powdering Herself*.
- (CLICK) Recent **scans** revealed that Seurat originally painted himself at his easel in a mirror on the wall behind the sitter who was his mistress, Madeleine Knobloch (pronounced "no-bloc"), but he later painted over his own image with a vase of flowers after it was **ridiculed** by a friend.(CLICK)
- He was **born** Georges Pierre Seurat on 2nd December, 1859, in Paris. His family were **moderately prosperous** as his father (Antoine-Chrysostome Seurat), a former legal official, had become wealthy through speculating in property. Seurat had an older brother (Émile) and sister (Marie-Berthe) and the family lived primarily in Paris, though his father spent much time at their property in **Le Raincy** (pronounced "ran-see") in the eastern suburbs of Paris.
- Seurat showed early artistic promise and took initial **art lessons from his uncle**. In 1875, he began formal art training under the sculptor Justin Lequien at a municipal art school. From 1878 to 1879, he studied at the prestigious **École des Beaux-Arts** (under Henri Lehmann) but left feeling constrained by academic traditions. Influenced by **Impressionism**, and fascinated by the **science of**

colour and optics, he developed his unique technique known as Pointillism, seen here.

- Seurat's career was **brief but impactful**. Key works like *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884–1886) and *Bathers at Asnières* (1884), which we will see next, established him as a major innovator. Seurat never married but lived with his mistress, Madeleine Knobloch, and they had a son.

FIVE LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT SEURAT:

- 1. His only self-portrait is hidden beneath the painting *Young Woman Powdering Herself*, revealed by X-rays.
- 2. Seurat's art combined a delicate sensitivity with a precise, almost mathematical approach.
- 3. He was influenced by aesthetics combining music, mathematics, and visual art theory.
- 4. Seurat's masterpiece inspired the Stephen Sondheim musical *Sunday in the Park with George*.
- 5. Despite his fame, Seurat's life was quiet and intensely focused on theory and technique rather than socialising.[1][2][3][4][6]

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Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884-1886, 207.5 x 308 cm, Art Institute of Chicago

Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884-1886, 207.5 x 308 cm, Art Institute of Chicago

- This is Seurat's masterpiece ***A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte***. It is a seminal work of Neo-Impressionism and pointillism. It shows people from various **social classes** leisurely enjoying a Sunday afternoon on La Grande Jatte, an **island in the Seine River** near Paris, then a quiet retreat from urban life. Seurat meticulously portrayed men, women, and children in a formal, **almost statuesque manner**, reminiscent of **ancient Egyptian and Greek friezes**, emphasising **timelessness and harmony** in colour and form and perhaps the **stiffness and emotional emptiness** of the upper-middle-class society.
- The island was a popular leisure spot in the late 19th century, which Seurat captured with scientific precision using his pointillist technique—applying tiny dots of pure paint that merge optically when viewed from a distance. Stand back from your screen to achieve the correct blending effect.
- The painting was first exhibited in **1886 at the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition**, shocking many with its size, technique, and composition. It stood apart from the looser, more spontaneous Impressionist style, **heralding the new Neo-Impressionist movement**. Critical reception was divided; **some admired its innovation and order**, while others **criticised** it for what they saw as a **rigid, mechanical approach**. Over time, it has gained universal acclaim and is **considered Seurat's definitive masterpiece**.
- It is his first major and widely recognised work of art, marking both his artistic

breakthrough and a **turning point in modern art history**. [1][2][3][4][9]

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Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *Bathers at Asnières*, 1884, 200 x 301 cm, National Gallery, London

Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *Bathers at Asnières*, 1884, 200 x 301 cm, National Gallery, London

- In *Bathers at Asnières* we see a group of young working-class men relaxing and bathing on the banks of the River Seine in Asnières, a suburb northwest of Paris. The figures are portrayed with a sense of calm lying and sitting in the sun by the water in a carefully composed arrangement that blends naturalism with formal structure. Note that none of the figures are looking at us or interacting with each other. It doesn't convey the usual sense of joy and fun but rather a modern sense of **isolation and alienation**.
- In the background of the painting, industrial elements such as a bridge and factories with tall chimneys are visible. These factories represent the growing industrial landscape of suburban Paris, symbolising the working-class context of the bathers. Despite the industrial machinery, the scene has a serene atmosphere with sailboats on the river and trees surrounding the area.
- Seurat completed the painting when **he was just 24 years old** and submitted it to the **1884 Paris Salon**, where it **was rejected by the jury**. Consequently, Seurat exhibited *Bathers at Asnières* at the **first Salon des Artistes Indépendants** the same year, where it was hung in a less prestigious location and **attracted little immediate attention**. Critical reception was **initially lukewarm**, with many finding his style and subject matter **too innovative and original** to appreciate. It was only well **after Seurat's untimely death seven years later** that the painting gained recognition as a **masterpiece**. [1][3][6][7]

NOTES

- **The Société des artistes indépendants** is an association formed in Paris on July 19, 1884, and the official organizer of the Salon des indépendants. It was created by several artists to offer the public works of art rejected by the Paris Official Salon. It differs from the former **Salon des refusés** by its total independence from official institutions and there was no admission jury.

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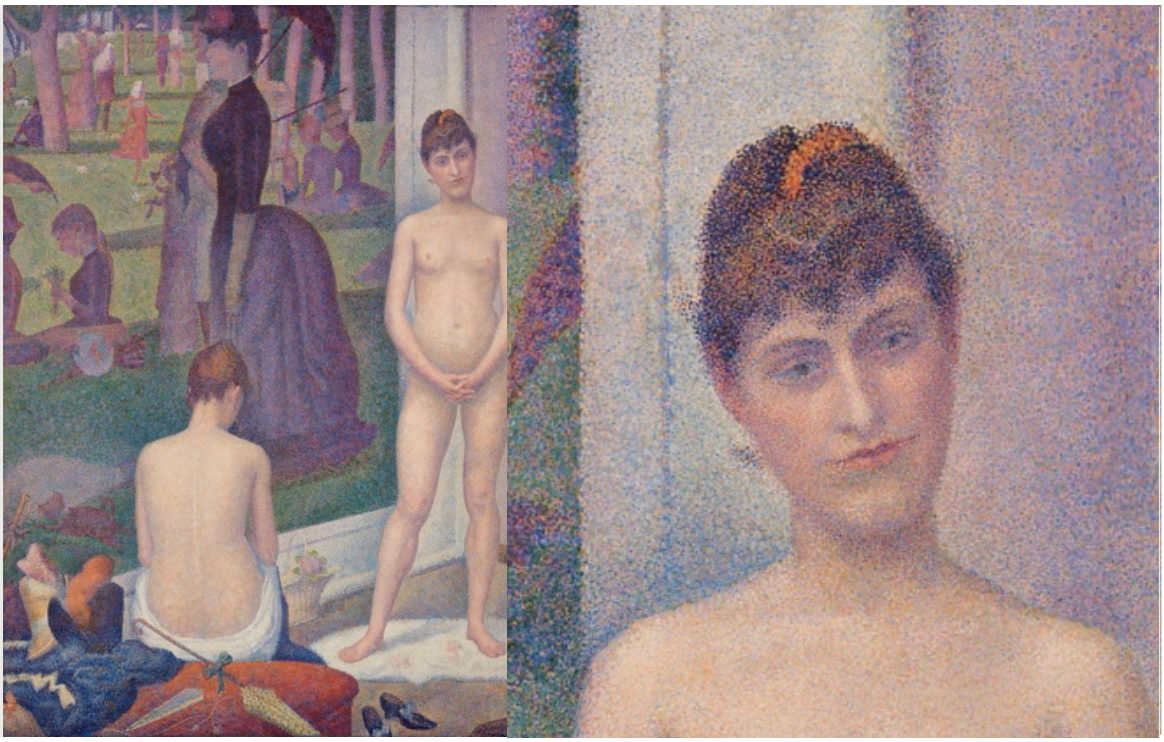

Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *The Models* (*Les Poseuses*), 1886-1888, 123 x 164 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

- *The Models* or *Les Poseuses* (pronounced "lay pose-ers") shows three female models in an artist's studio. The figures are shown naked or semi-naked, conveying the **mundane reality of their work as artists' models** rather than idealised muses or goddesses. The setting is intimate and indoors, in contrast to Seurat's earlier outdoor scenes.
- On the wall in the painting, a **portion of *La Grande Jatte*** which serves several purposes: it **anchors this painting** in Seurat's artistic timeline, it **visually connects** the two works and it invites viewers to **compare** the public spectacle of the **large outdoor scene** with the **private toil** behind the scenes, revealing the practical labour behind the grand compositions. The presence of *La Grande Jatte* highlights to the models' role in creating such masterpieces, making visible the usually hidden relationship between artistic idealisation and the models' everyday reality.
- Also, note that the French title *Les Poseuses* has a double meaning, it also means the posers, people who put on a deliberate performance, a comment on both models and members of high society.
- (CLICK) The **model in the centre** may be the same woman who posed for the largest standing figure in *La Grande Jatte*. This enlargement enables you to see the **Pointillist technique more clearly** and the enormous labour required for such a large work. (CLICK) Remember the intention is to stand sufficiently far away that the dots disappear and blend together.

- Seurat exhibited it at the Salon des Indépendants in 1888. The painting challenged traditional hierarchies by treating **the banal and intimate scene of modelling** on a **large canvas** size typically reserved for grand history paintings. Critical reaction was **mixed**, with some **critics baffled** by the combination of experimental pointillist technique and unembellished subject matter, while others recognised its **modernity and depth**. The work is now celebrated as a bold statement on art, labour, and the female nude, revealing Seurat's pioneering approach to both technique and social commentary. [1][2][3]

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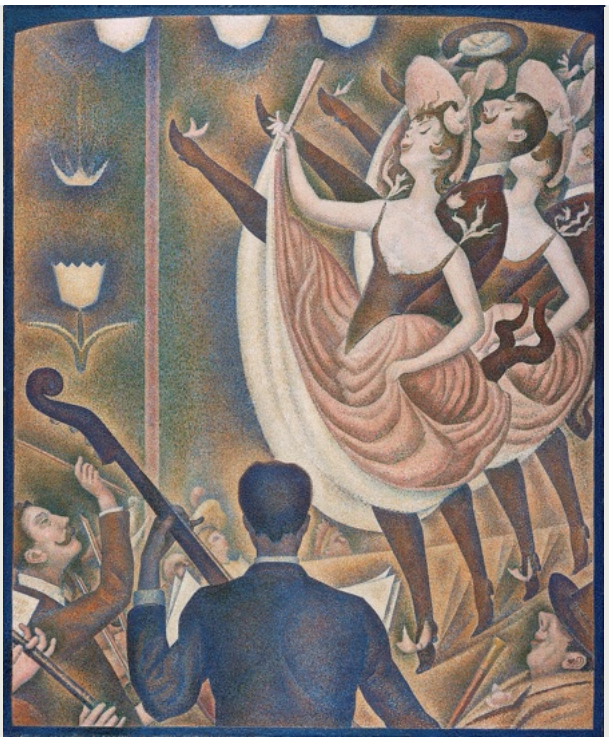

Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *The Can-Can* (*Le Chahut*), 1889-1890, 170 x 141 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum

Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *The Can-Can* (*Le Chahut*), 1889-1890, 170 x 141 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum

- Le Chahut (pronounced “shay-oo”) or the Can-Can shows a lively scene of dancers and musicians performing the risqué and famous can-can dance at the **Moulin Rouge** or a similar Parisian dance hall. The dancers form a chorus line, energetically lifting their skirts and kicking their legs high in rhythmic repetition, capturing the vitality and exuberance of the dance popular in fin de siècle Paris dance halls.
- The Can-Can was **shocking** as the high kicks revealed **glimpses of underwear**, a scandalous break of the moral rules of society. At that time, women wore **pantalettes**—that is, underwear with an open crotch—which meant that more might be revealed. However, the Moulin Rouge did not allow costumes that were too revealing and so this is unlikely as the aim was to titillate without going any further.
- The dancers and musicians are depicted with a stylised, almost **caricatured stiffness**, arranged with strong **upward lines** that convey the **dynamic energy** of the performance. The bandleader, is lower right and the musicians play instruments including the double bass and note the **spectator bottom right** with the lascivious grin.
- "The Can-Can" was first exhibited at the **1890 Salon de la Société des Artistes Indépendants** in Paris. It became a focus of critical attention and debate among Symbolist critics for its formal innovation and emotive power, despite the seemingly frivolous subject of a popular dance. Critics noted Seurat’s **departure**

from Impressionist spontaneity toward a more **systematic and decorative approach**, with colour and line carefully orchestrated to convey emotion and rhythm. [1][2][3][7]

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Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *Parade de Cirque* (*The Circus*), 1890-1891, 185 x 152 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *Parade de Cirque* (*The Circus*), 1890-1891, 185 x 152 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- This **final work of Seurat was painted in 1890-91** the year he died. It shows a vibrant performance at the **Circus Fernando** (later Circus Médrano) in Paris. A female acrobat is standing on a horse, surrounded by clowns tumbling and a ringmaster surrounded by a static crowd. The circus venue was located **near Seurat's studio on Rue des Martyrs** (pronounced "mar-tier"), a popular Parisian entertainment spot. He uses dots of colour and dynamic lines to convey movement and atmosphere with white and primary colours dominating. The audience is shown in tiered seating, socially stratified from the upper class near the front to the lower classes in the gallery.
- It was **exhibited posthumously** at the Salon des Indépendants in 1891, as Seurat died shortly before the exhibition opened. The painting was **unfinished** but **received praise** for its formal innovation and harmony through colour and line.
- He died aged just 31 on 29 March 1891, likely from infectious angina although other historians have suggested meningitis, pneumonia or diphtheria. His young son died just two weeks later from the same illness. Seurat's funeral was held (on 30 March at the Church of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul) in Paris, and he is buried at Père-Lachaise Cemetery. When he died he was **not widely famous**—he was respected but his full recognition and influence only **grew posthumously**, establishing him as a pioneer of Neo-Impressionism and scientific approaches to art. [1][2][3][4]

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Paul Signac (1863–1935), *Self-Portrait* (*Portrait de l'artiste*), 1890, Conté crayon, private collection

Paul Signac (1863–1935), *Self-Portrait* (*Portrait de l'artiste*), 1890, Conté crayon, private collection

- That brings us to the other founder of Neo-Impressionism, Paul Victor Jules Signac. Born on November 11, 1863, in Paris into a family that owned a **successful saddlery business**. Although his parents initially wanted him to **pursue architecture**, but when he was 18 he decided to follow his **passion for painting**. He was **largely self-taught** but influenced early on by the Impressionists, especially **Claude Monet**, whom he met in 1884. That same year, Signac **co-founded the Société des Artistes Indépendants**, an artist-run exhibition that rejected traditional jury selection, allowing artists to present their works freely.
- Signac's career was **deeply intertwined with Georges Seurat**, whose systematic use of colour and brush stroke impressed him greatly. **Together, they developed Pointillism**. **After Seurat's death, Signac became the leading figure** and spokesperson for Neo-Impressionism and Divisionism.
- He drew this well-known portrait when he was 27 in Conté crayon the year before his friend Seurat died.
- Signac was an **avid sailor**, spending many summers painting **coastal landscapes** of France, particularly in St. Tropez, Collioure (pronounced "koh-lyoor", the"ll' is like the "y" is "yes") and other Mediterranean ports. His seascapes and cityscapes often featured vibrant, harmonious colours meticulously applied in small mosaic-like brushstrokes. Over his lifetime, Signac also experimented with watercolours, etchings, and lithographs.

- Signac was politically engaged and saw the South of France as an anarchist utopia and he promoted radical ideas alongside his artistic pursuits.

Notes

- He was President of the Société des Artistes Indépendants from 1908 until his death in Paris on August 15, 1935, at age 71. The Society was established in Paris on 29 July 1884 by a group of artists that included **Paul Signac**, Georges Seurat, Albert Dubois-Pillet, and Odilon Redon. This organisation arose in reaction to the rigid, exclusionary policies of the official Salon, seeking to provide artists a platform to exhibit their work without the constraints of a jury or awards, embodied in their motto "Sans jury ni récompense" (without jury nor reward). The Society allowed new ideas and innovative styles—such as Neo-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism—to flourish.

Five little-known facts about Paul Signac:

- 1. He nearly fought a duel over defence of Vincent van Gogh's work.
- 2. While famed for dot painting, his watercolours are freer and more spontaneous.
- 3. Signac was the first to buy a painting by Henri Matisse.
- 4. He promoted Fauvism and Cubism by exhibiting their works as society president.
- 5. His paintings inspired later avant-garde movements through their innovative use of colour and form.[1][2][3][5][6]

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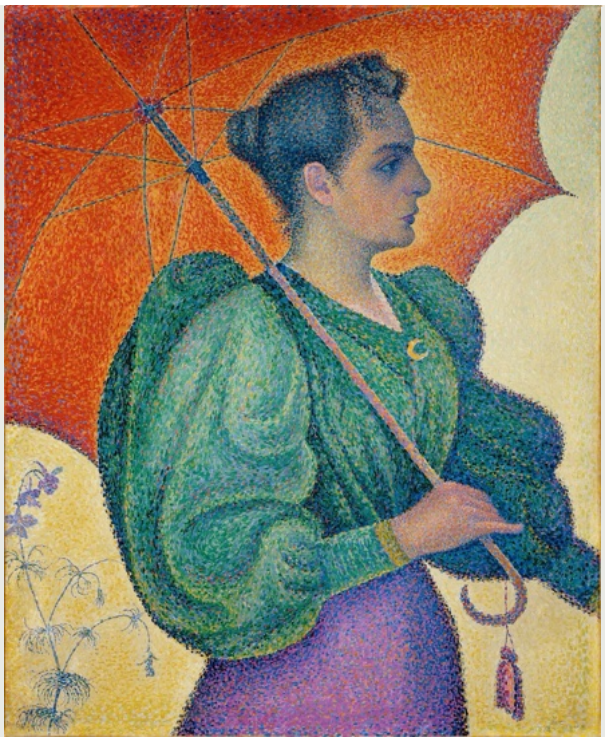

Jeanne Selmersheim-Desgrange

Paul Signac (1863–1935), *Woman with Umbrella*, 1893, 81 × 65 cm, Musée d'Orsay

Paul Signac (1863–1935), *Woman with Umbrella*, 1893, 81 × 65 cm, Musée d'Orsay

- In 1892 (on 7 November), Signac married Berthe Roblès at the town hall of the 18th arrondissement of Paris. This portrait of her was painted the following year and was probably painted while he was still in Paris.
- Five years later (in November 1897), they moved to a new apartment in the Castel Béranger (pronounced "KAH-stell BEH-rahng-geh"), which was built by Hector Guimard (pronounced "EHK-tor GEE-mar,"). A little later, in December of the same year, they acquired **a house in Saint-Tropez named, La Hune** ("The Crow's Nest", pronounced "lay-oon"), where the painter had a vast studio constructed that he inaugurated on 16 August 1898.
- (CLICK) In September 1913, Signac **rented a house at Antibes**, where he took up residence with **Jeanne Selmersheim-Desgrange**. **Jeanne was a painter and designer of jewellery**, was their next-door neighbour and **left her husband and three children** to be with Signac. Despite the separation, Signac never divorced Berthe; he maintained a complex and somewhat amicable relationship with both women.
- Jeanne gave birth to their daughter, **Ginette**, on 2 October 1913. Meanwhile, Signac left La Hune and the Castel Beranger apartment to Berthe and they remained friends for the rest of his life. On 6 April 1927, Signac formally adopted Ginette. (CLICK)
- Signac continued to support Berthe financially, wrote to her daily—over **9,000**

letters have been recorded—and saw her regularly. Berthe was unable to have children, and Signac convinced her to accept Jeanne and their daughter Ginette, who was born in 1913. **Berthe adopted Ginette**, and the child had a unique family life with **two mothers**.

- This arrangement, though unusual, was carried out with some dignity and understanding between all parties involved, including **Berthe and Jeanne, who did not see each other for 25 years** but later joined the funeral procession together when Signac died.
- Paul Signac died from sepsis in Paris on 15 August 1935 at the age of 71. His body was cremated and was interred three days later, on 18 August, at the Père Lachaise Cemetery.

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Paul Signac (1863-1935), Opus 217. *Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon*, 1890, 73.5 x 92.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Paul Signac (1863-1935), Opus 217. *Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon*, 1890, 73.5 x 92.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- Signac's painting with its long title, "**Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890**," reflects the artist's interest in combining scientific and musical terminology with art, capturing the rhythmic, structured nature of Neo-Impressionism. The word "Opus" is borrowed from music, meaning a creative work or composition, signalling this portrait as a deliberate artistic statement and aligning painting with musical and scientific harmony.
- The man portrayed is **Félix Fénéon** who coined the term "Neo-Impressionism". He was a prominent French art critic, curator, anarchist activist, and early champion of Neo-Impressionism. He was crucial in supporting artists like Signac and Georges Seurat, helping define and promote the movement. His enigmatic personality and radical ideas made him a fascinating subject.
- In the painting, Fénéon is shown **holding a delicate cyclamen flower** (often mistaken for a lily) in one hand, **symbolising purity** or artistic refinement. His other hand holds a top hat and a cane, symbols of **bourgeois respectability** and urban sophistication. The combination reflects Fénéon's complex identity as a **dandy** intellectually engaged in avant-garde art and anarchist politics.
- The background is a **swirling, kaleidoscopic pattern** inspired by **Japanese prints** (and Charles Henry's theories of rhythm and colour). It creates a dynamic, almost psychedelic aura around Fénéon, making him appear as an almost

magical figure orchestrating artistic modernism. This portrait blends representation with abstract rhythm, offering a key visual manifesto of Neo-Impressionism and early modernism.[1][3][5]

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Paul Signac (1863–1935), *In the Time of Harmony. The Golden Age is not in the Past, it is in the Future,* 1893-95, 310 × 410 cm, Mairie de Montreuil Collection, France

Paul Signac (1863–1935), *In the Time of Harmony. The Golden Age is not in the Past, it is in the Future,* 1893-95, 310 × 410 cm, Mairie de Montreuil Collection, France

- In 1891 **Georges Seurat died** suddenly and unexpectedly and this deeply affected Signac as they were close friends. Signac **became the sole visionary** of the Neo-Impressionist movement and he continuing to promote and elaborate the theories they had developed together.
- By 1893 Signac, thirty, had settled into the **anarchist circles** of Paris and Saint-Tropez; **married the previous** year to Berthe Roblès in a civil ceremony (witnessed by Maximilien Luce), he divided his year between the capital and the Mediterranean. The present mural-sized canvas was **commissioned** in December 1893 by the **radical municipality** of Montreuil-sous-Bois for its **new town hall**, a socialist stronghold east of Paris. Work began in the winter studio at 11 quai d'Anjou and continued through two summers at La Hune (pronounced "lay-oon"); the artist signed it in July 1895.
- The composition depicts an **ideal anarchist community**: on the left, a family picnics beneath a plane tree; centre, a couple dances while children play boules; right, an elderly couple reads beneath oaks. The sea glints beyond, linking the scene to Saint-Tropez. Strict pointillist dots—cobalt, vermilion, emerald—fuse into luminous planes; the palette is warmer than Seurat's, with rose and gold predominating. The plane tree symbolises communal shade, the oak endurance; the absence of factories or clergy underscores utopian equality.
- France in 1893-95 reeled from anarchist bombings and the 1894 Dreyfus arrest;

Montreuil's mayor, Gustave Lefèvre, sought art to embody Kropotkin's mutual aid. A lesser-known detail: Signac painted the figures from **local models**—his **gardener** posed for the boules player, the bearded reader was modelled by **anarchist journalist Jean Grave**—yet idealised them to avoid portraiture. Exhibited unfinished at the 1894 Indépendants, it drew Émile Verhaeren's verdict in L'Art Moderne: "**Signac has given anarchy the serenity of Poussin**." Installed in Montreuil's marriage chamber in 1896, it was removed during the 1940 Vichy occupation and restored in 1983.

- The title, inscribed bottom right, directly counters Hesiod's regressive Golden Age: harmony lies ahead, through science and cooperation. Its scale and optimism influenced Matisse's 1905-06 Le Bonheur de vivre, proving pointillism could sustain large-scale utopian narrative.

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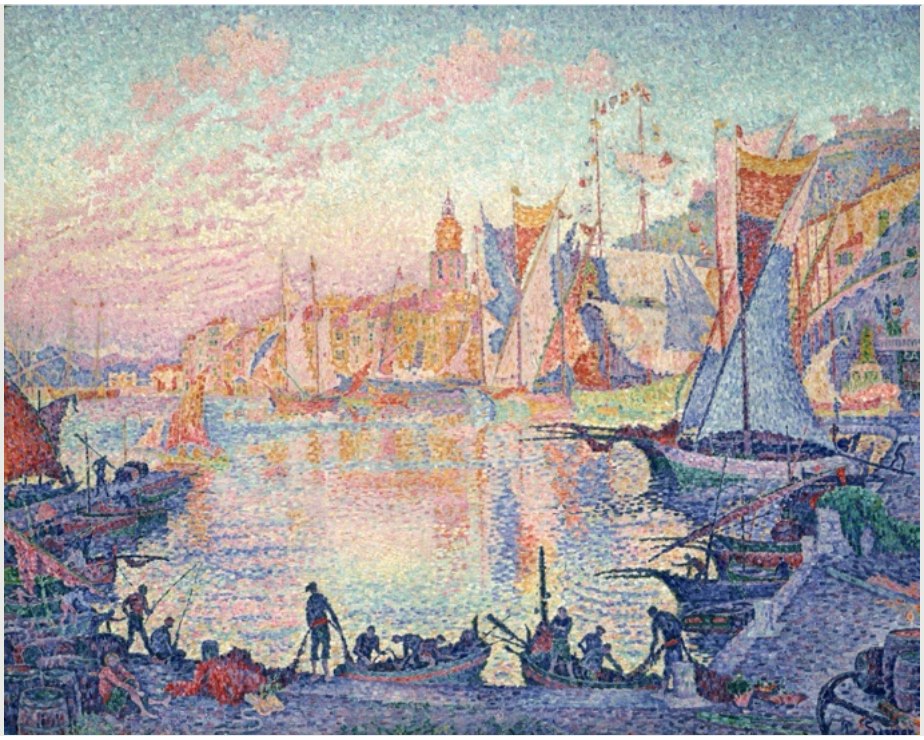

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *The Port of Saint-Tropez*, 1901-1902, 161.5 x 131 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *The Port of Saint-Tropez*, 1901-1902, 161.5 x 131 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

- Signac first **sailed into Saint-Tropez** in May 1892 aboard the yacht ***Olympia*** with **Henri-Edmond Cross**; by 1897 he had purchased land and completed La Hune (pronounced "lay-oon"), a house whose 12-metre studio faced the Gulf of Saint-Tropez. The present canvas was begun in the summer of 1901 and finished the following year; **no commission prompted it**—Signac painted for himself and for the annual Salon des Indépendants.
- The subject is the **inner harbour at late afternoon**: fishing boats lie at anchor, their masts forming a lattice against terracotta roofs that ascend to the bell-tower of **Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption**. The water reflects divided strokes of cobalt, viridian, and rose; the sky is built from pale lilac and lemon brushstrokes. By 1901 the artist had relaxed Seurat's microscopic pointillism into **broader, rectangular touches**—divisionism now served optical mixture rather than scientific dogma.
- France in 1901 still felt the aftershock of the Dreyfus Affair and the Riviera offered refuge from Parisian tensions. Cross lived nearby in Le Lavandou, **Matisse would arrive in 1904**, and soon develop Fauvism.
- Signac transferred this work to lithographic stone in 1902, deliberately omitting the clouds so that each printed sheet carried a unique sky. Exhibited at the 1902 Indépendants it drew Félix Fénéon's praise: "**Signac has rendered the sea's vibration with a precision that rivals the spectroscope**." It sold immediately to Karl-Ernst Osthaus and entered Japanese collections in 1988. Its

legacy lies in demonstrating how systematic colour could dissolve into lyric freedom, paving the way for Matisse's ***Luxe, calme et volupté*** of 1904-05, a work we will see later.

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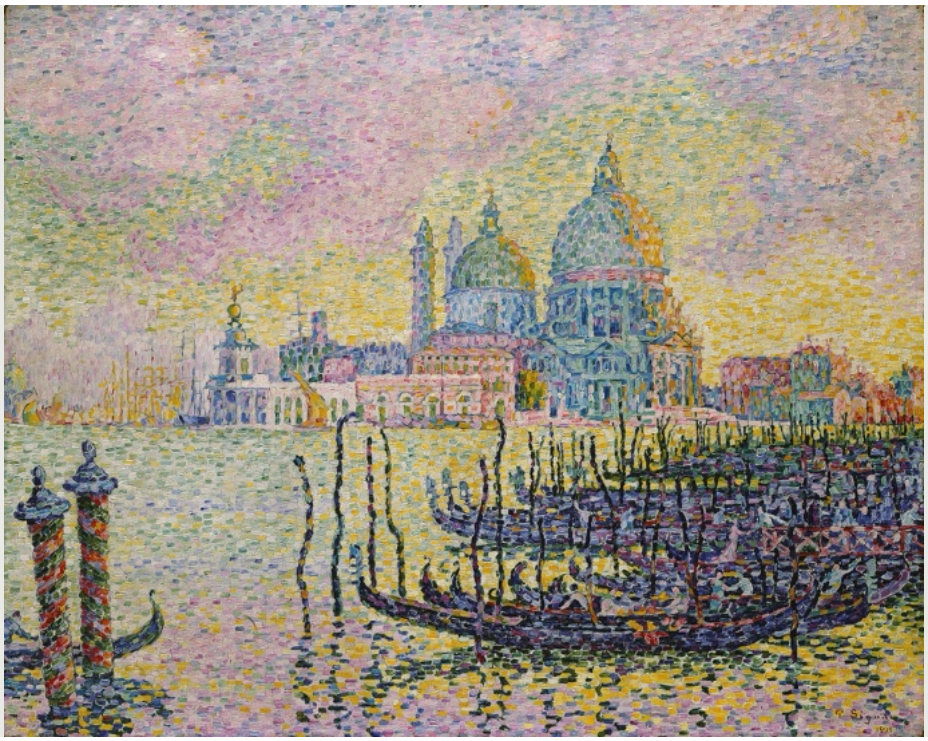

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *Grand Canal, Venice*, 1905, 73.5 x 92.1 cm, Toledo Museum of Art

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *Grand Canal, Venice*, 1905, 73.5 x 92.1 cm, Toledo Museum of Art

- In March 1904 Signac, now forty, sailed from Saint-Tropez to Venice aboard his new 12-metre yacht ***Turquoise***. He remained 24 March to 20 April and again from 28 February to 17 March the following year, lodging at the **Hôtel Beau Rivage** on the Riva degli Schiavoni. This work was painted in his studio at La Hune (pronounced "lay-oon") from sketches and watercolours executed on site; no Venetian patron commissioned it—Signac intended the work for the 1905 Salon des Indépendants.
- The view is taken from the **Accademia bridge**, looking south-east: the dome of Santa Maria della Salute rises left of centre, flanked by the Customs House and the Palazzo Ducale. Gondolas and sandoli (a utilitarian gondola used to transport goods) glide across water divided into brushstrokes of ultramarine, emerald, and vermilion; the sky is a pale rose-lilac veil.
- By 1905 he had fully abandoned Seurat's dots for the rectangular brushstrokes of pure pigment laid side by side to achieve luminosity through optical fusion. The Salute dome, a constant in his Venetian series, functions as both focal anchor and symbol of baroque opulence.
- Europe in 1905 simmered with pre-war tension; Venice, spared industrial blight, offered Signac an anarchist's vision of civic harmony. **Henri-Edmond Cross** visited the 1905 Indépendants and wrote from Saint-Tropez: "**Your Venice sings louder than the gondoliers**."

- Signac kept a **pocket spectroscope** on the gondola to measure exact wavelengths of canal reflections, later joking that the instrument frightened the oarsmen more than the 1904 cholera scare.
- When it was exhibited it sold within days to the American collector John Quinn, entering the Toledo Museum in 1930. Its influence is measurable: Matisse adopted similar brushstrokes for *Le Bonheur de vivre* in 1905-06. Félix Fénéon declared in *Le Figaro*, "**Signac has made the Grand Canal breathe with the precision of a prism**."

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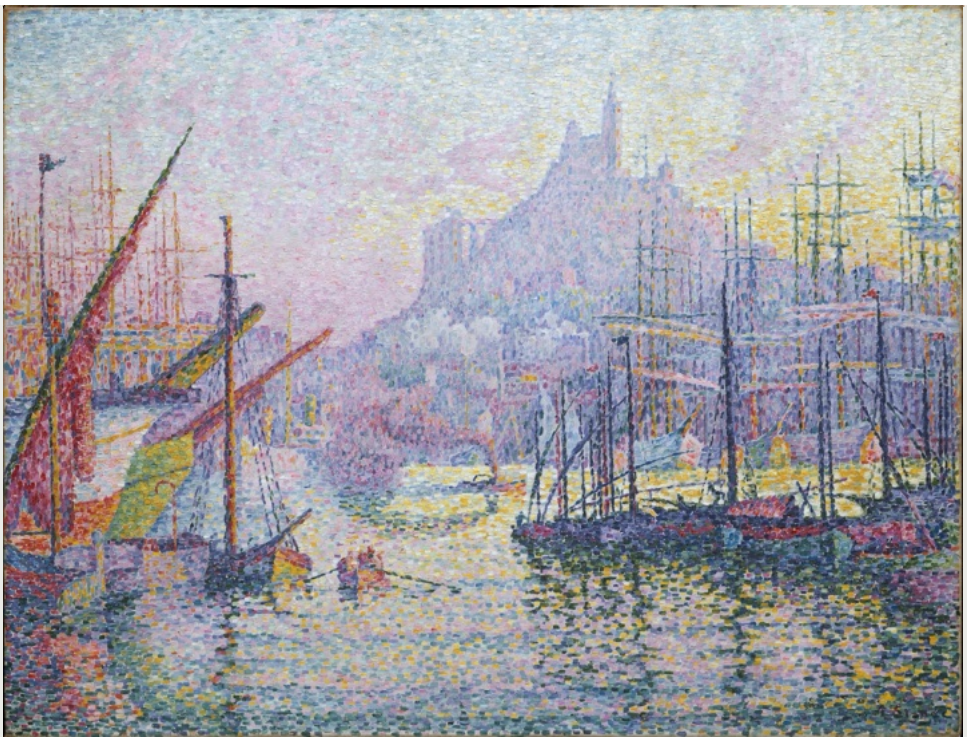

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde (La Bonne-Mère) Marseilles*, June 1905, 88.9 x 116.2 cm, The Met, New York

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde (La Bonne-Mère) Marseilles*, June 1905, 88.9 x 116.2 cm, The Met, New York

- Signac painted this during a sailing trip along the French coast. He arrived in Marseilles that summer, motivated by his love for marine subjects and the port's dynamic energy—no patron commissioned it. It shows the Basilica of Notre-Dame de la Garde, a symbol of protection for Marseilles' seafarers since its 1864 consecration. Nicknamed 'La Bonne Mère', the church's hilltop position dominates the scene, with its golden Madonna statue overlooking the Vieux-Port.
- Signac captures this from afar, foregrounding sailboats and masts against the azure sea, evoking the city's maritime heritage amid early 20th-century industrial bustle. He uses tiny dots of unmixed colour—cerulean blues, emerald greens, fiery yellows to create optical vibrancy.
- In 1905, France faced social unrest, including the loi de séparation des Églises et de l'État, yet Signac's work offers escapism. An engaging anecdote: he painted en plein air despite choppy waters, joking in a letter to Fénéon about '**dancing with the waves**'. Critic Octave Maus remarked in 1906, '**Signac's Marseilles harbour pulses with life, his dots like sparks of revolution in colour**.'

NOTES

- Signac was an enthusiastic yachtsman who owned several vessels over the course of his life, reflecting his passion for sailing along the Mediterranean and

beyond. His yachts included:

- ***Olympia***: This was one of his earlier and most famous yachts, acquired around 1895 (some sources specify 1892 or 1896). Named after Édouard Manet's controversial 1863 painting *Olympia*, it was a cutter-rigged boat that Signac used extensively in the late 1890s and early 1900s for coastal trips, including voyages to Brittany, Holland, and the south of France. He often hosted artist friends aboard, such as Henri-Edmond Cross, and used it as a floating studio for sketching seascapes.
- ***Turquoise***: In 1904, Signac purchased this larger, more modern yacht as a replacement or addition to his fleet. It was on the *Turquoise* that he embarked on his 1905 sailing expedition along the Provençal coast, including his stay in **Marseilles** where he painted Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde (La Bonne-Mère). This vessel allowed for longer journeys and better stability for en plein air work, and he continued using it into the 1910s.
- He also owned smaller boats such as one called ***Manet*** in the 1880s.

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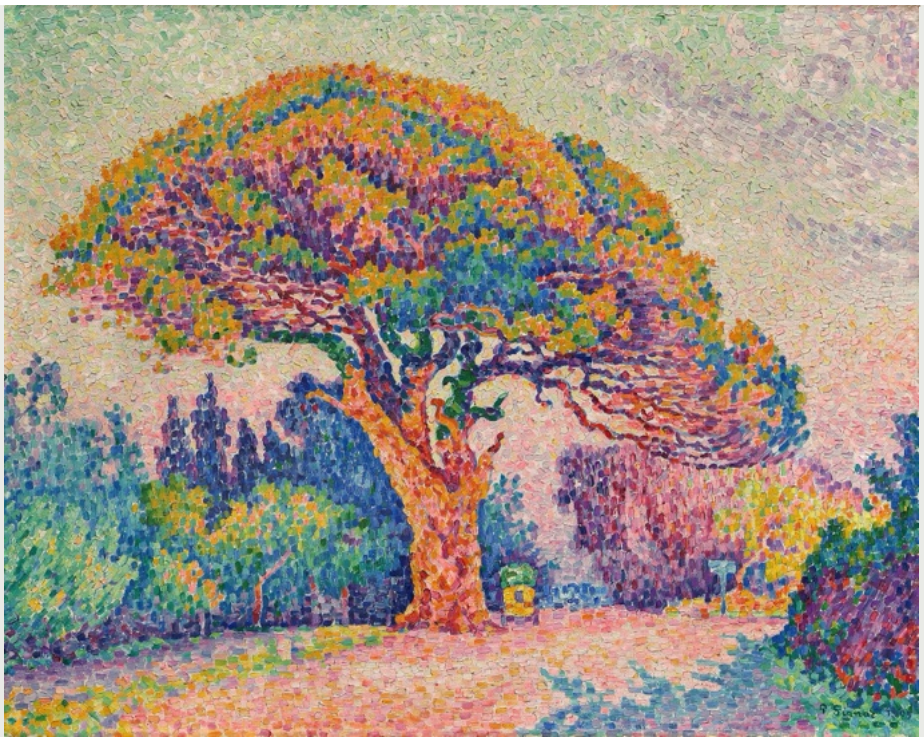

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *The Pine Tree at Saint Tropez*, 1909, 72 x 92 cm, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *The Pine Tree at Saint Tropez*, 1909, 72 x 92 cm, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

- By 1909, Signac had established **Saint Tropez** as his artistic home, having purchased his house, ***La Hune*** (pronounced "lay-oon"), in the late 1890s. This coastal village became a crucible for colour experimentation and leisurely sailing, two passions that significantly influenced his work.
- *The Pine Tree at Saint Tropez* captures a stately maritime pine standing beside the Mediterranean, bathed in dappled sunlight. The painting is recognised for its vibrant points and squares of pure colour, applied in meticulous patterns that coalesce in the eye, typifying Signac's later pointillist evolution. There is no narrative, it is a celebration of natural rhythm and structure, evoking both the enduring solidity of the tree and the shimmering, ephemeral quality of light on land and sea.
- This work symbolises Signac's profound attachment to the Mediterranean landscape, which he famously termed a **utopian visual refuge**. At the time, critics appreciated Signac's technical precision and bold chromatic experiments. They noted, for instance, the way he "**brings the vibrations of nature through science**," a testament to his unique blend of rigour and poetic vision. The artwork clearly marks Signac's continued commitment to pushing the boundaries of landscape painting into the modern era.

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Paul Signac (1863-1935), *Entrée du port de la Rochelle*, 1921, 130.5 x 162 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- ***Entrée du port de la Rochelle*** is an example of his mature Neo-Impressionist style. At this point in his career, he was well established as a key figure in the Post-Impressionist movement and the founder of pointillism alongside Georges Seurat. It shows the harbour entrance at **La Rochelle**, a historic port city on the Atlantic coast of France.
- By 1921, Signac was in his **late fifties** and had spent decades refining his technique of applying small, distinct yet harmonious spots of colour to canvas, allowing the viewer's eye to blend the hues optically. The painting vividly captures the bustling maritime activity of the harbour, with numerous sailboats gently bobbing on calm waters. The composition is framed by **solid geometric shapes of the medieval towers** guarding the port and lean spires that punctuate the skyline. Signac's colour palette balances warm pinks and purples in the sky with the cool blues and greens of the sea, evoking a serene yet lively atmosphere.
- Having long been an **enthusiast of sailing** and coastal landscapes, His love of maritime subjects meant that he often painted these scenes as he sailed around the coast. He painted from both memory and direct observation while aboard his yacht, merging scientific precision with poetic sensibility.

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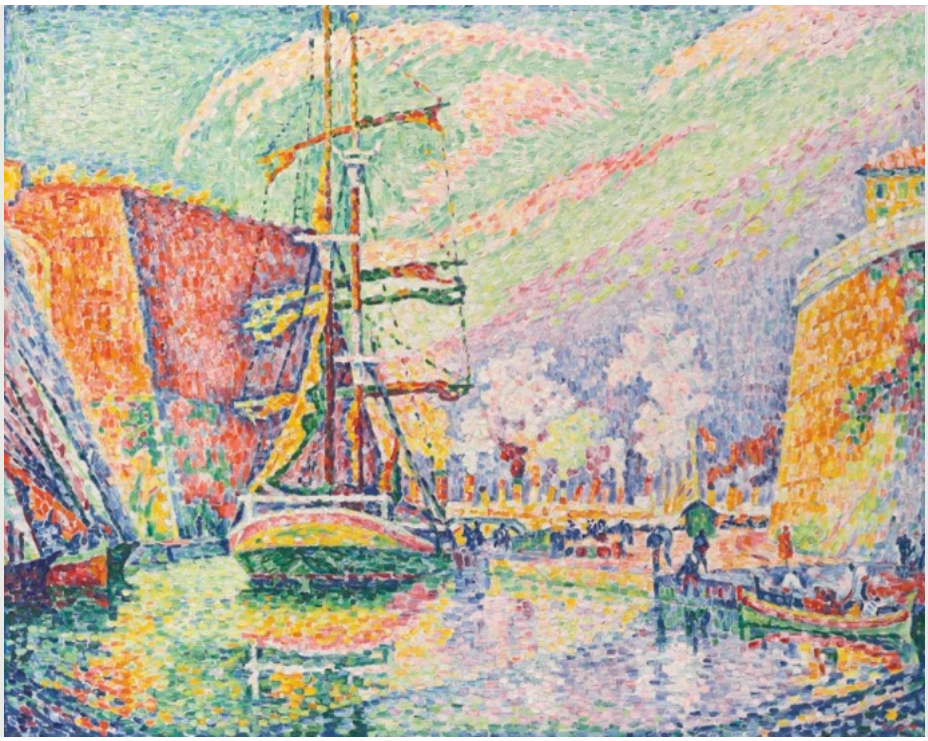

Paul Signac (1863-1935), *Marseille, le port, 1934,* 73 x 92 cm,

- Signac continued to actively paint into the last decades of his life. Although his artistic output slowed during World War I, by 1919 he resumed painting more frequently, partly due to **financial necessity**, producing around **21 works per year** under contracts with art dealers. He remained committed to his Neo-Impressionist technique, refining the use of colour and light, particularly in his marine and coastal scenes, which reflected his lifelong passion for sailing and the Mediterranean.
- His **last best-known painting** is widely considered to be this, ***Marseille, le port***, completed in 1934, just a year before his death. This large canvas vividly captures the bustling port of Marseille. He brings together a lifetime of exploration employing a mature style marked by looser, more expressive brushstrokes compared to his earlier, more rigid technique.
- He **died in Paris** on 15 August 1935 at the age of 71, from complications related to sepsis. His funeral took place shortly after, and he was cremated before being interred at Père Lachaise Cemetery, the famous resting place of many notable cultural figures. The funeral was attended by contemporaries and art world figures, marking the passing of an influential artist and theorist.
- At the time of his death, Signac was respected as a leading figure of Neo-Impressionism, having played a crucial role in developing and promoting Pointillism alongside Georges Seurat. However, his reputation was somewhat **overshadowed by newer modernist movements** emerging in the early 20th century. Since his death, **his stature has grown significantly**. Art historians and

critics now recognise him as a pioneer who bridged Impressionism and modern art, contributing to abstract and colour theory developments. His legacy as an innovator and influential mentor to younger artists remains firmly established in art history.

- **I would like to finish this talk with four works by other artists who used the pointillist technique if only for a short while.**

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Henri-Edmond Cross (1856–1910), *The Evening Air (L'air du soir),* c. 1893, 116 × 164 cm, Musée d'Orsay

Henri-Edmond Cross (1856–1910), *The Evening Air (L'air du soir),* c. 1893, 116 × 164 cm, Musée d'Orsay

- Henri-Edmond Cross (1856–1910) was a French painter and printmaker who played a crucial role in the development of Neo-Impressionism. Born Henri-Edmond-Joseph Delacroix, he adopted the name "Cross" to distinguish himself from the famous Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix. After early studies in Lille and Paris, including mentorship under Carolus-Duran, he initially painted in a dark, realist style but gradually embraced bright colours influenced by Impressionism. By 1891, he fully adopted Neo-Impressionism, inspired by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, becoming one of the movement's leading practitioners and a founding member of the Société des Artistes Indépendants.
- ***The Evening Air*** (L'air du soir), painted around 1893, epitomises Cross's mature style with its vibrant, harmonious colour palette and pointillist technique. The work depicts a **dreamlike landscape** suffused with radiant hues capturing the fleeting moment of **twilight**. The glowing sky and gently undulating landscape evoke a poetic sense of tranquillity and transition from day to night, reflecting a symbolic meditation on the **ephemeral nature of time and life**.
- Cross's work often conveyed **political as well as aesthetic ideals**; like his Neo-Impressionist peers, he was an **anarchist** and saw art as a path toward utopia. *The Evening Air* can thus be read as a **symbol of peace and hope amidst societal turmoil**. His paintings influenced Fauvist artists like Henri Matisse, credited with pushing modern art toward expressive colour and abstraction.
- Cross settled in Saint-Clair near Saint-Tropez in the 1890s and produced many

sun-drenched landscapes there, all suffused with optimism and lyricism. He exhibited widely until his death in 1910, and his contributions are recognised as foundational to 20th-century colour theory and modernism.

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Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), *Picking Peas (La cueillette des pois),* 1887, 53.3 × 64.4 cm, private collection

Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), *Picking Peas (La cueillette des pois),* 1887, 53.3 × 64.4 cm, private collection

- Camille Pissarro, adopted the Pointillist method during the late 1880s after meeting Seurat and Signac. A good example is this, *Picking Peas* (1887), where he used dabs of colour to capture agricultural labourers and fields.[1]
- Pissarro experimented with pointillism roughly between 1885 and 1888. He became dissatisfied with its **labour-intensive process** and sometimes **rigid appearance** and returned to a more loosely brushed Impressionist style by 1890.
- Pissarro's lived in Éragny-sur-Epte from 1884 until his death and this period marked a profound engagement with countryside scenes and working-class subjects. ***Picking Peas*** (La cueillette des pois), reflects this period and is recognised as one of Pissarro's important contributions to Neo-Impressionism and his broader artistic legacy. The scene highlights the dignity and beauty of peasant work, a recurring theme in his work. The composition balances human activity with the surrounding landscape, using pointillist technique to create shimmering, vibrant light that enlivens the scene.
- It was the subject of a **legal battle** after being **looted by the Nazis** in 1943 under anti-Semitic laws during the German occupation of France. After being sold at an auction in New York in 1995, the painting was the subject of a legal dispute. In July 2020, France's highest court ruled it must be returned to the heirs of the Jewish art collector, Simon Bauer.

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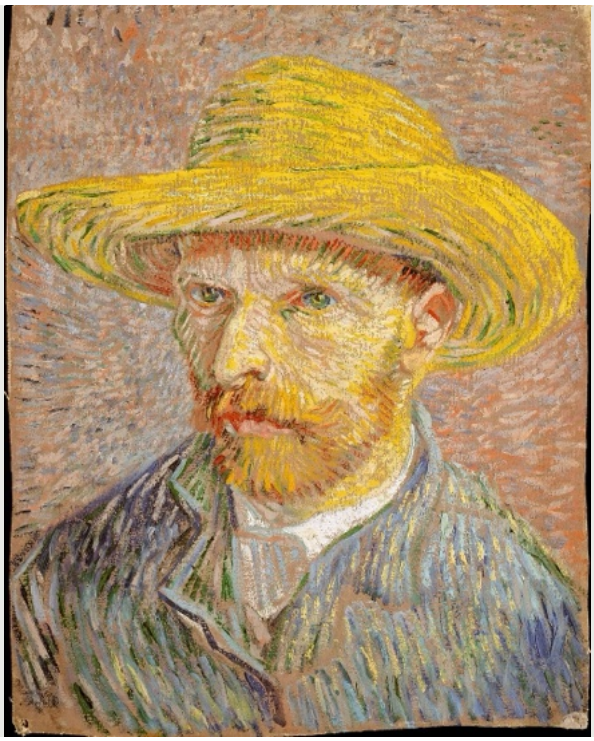

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat* (obverse: *The Potato Peeler*), 1887, 40.6 × 31.8 cm, The Met, New York

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat* (obverse: *The Potato Peeler*), 1887, 40.6 × 31.8 cm, The Met, New York

- Although van Gogh did not strictly follow Pointillism, he was intrigued by the optical mixing ideas, using separated brushstrokes and dabs of colour in works like this, ***Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat***. [1]
- At the time he produced more than twenty self-portraits and as he was poor but determined to improve his skills he became his own best sitter: "**I purposely bought a good enough mirror to work from myself, for want of a model**."
- He experimented with pointillism during his Paris years between 1886 and 1888 and was intrigued by the scientific approach to colour and light.
- Instead of rigid dots he often used **very short, thick brushstrokes** to build colour and texture. His style here retained a distinctive immediacy and intensity that set him apart from the more orderly strictness of Seurat and Signac.
- He ultimately **dropped the technique** because he found it **too constraining and unemotional** for his expressive aims. He preferred to convey raw, emotive power through bolder, more spontaneous brushwork and thicker paint application. His letters reveal his **mixed feelings**: **admiration for the scientific technique coupled with frustration** over its limitations for capturing the inner psychological and spiritual qualities he sought.
- This brief but intense phase infused his work with new insights into colour and light, informing some of his most powerful later paintings. He never completely abandoned the principle of optical colour blending but merged it with his

personal, dynamic brushwork to pioneer a uniquely expressive style that profoundly influenced modern art.

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Henri Matisse (1869-1954), *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* ("*Luxury, Calm and Pleasure*"), 1904, 98 x 118.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Henri Matisse (1869-1954), *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* ("***Luxury, Calm and Pleasure***"), 1904, 98 x 118.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- Finally, we come to Luxe, Calme et Volupté or ***Luxury, Calm and Pleasure*** by Henri Matisse. It was exhibited at the 1905 Salon des Indépendants alongside the Neo-Impressionist painters Henri-Edmond Cross and Paul Signac.[14]
- It is a **landmark work** marking the **inception of Fauvism** while embracing an adapted version of Pointillism. Painted after a **summer spent with Paul Signac** and other Neo-Impressionists in Saint-Tropez, Matisse explored the pointillist technique with its vibrant, separated brushstrokes of pure colour. However, Matisse's use diverged from the strict, scientific application favoured by Seurat and Signac. His brushstrokes—short dashes or spots—were looser and more expressive, using intense, saturated colours to create a rich tapestry of colour rather than delicate optical blending.
- The painting is **Matisse's most important work** in which he used the Pointillist technique advocated by Signac, which Matisse had adopted in 1898 after reading Signac's essay, *d'Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme* (***From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism***) [15][16]. **Signac purchased the work** after the exhibition.[17]
- The title is based on from Charles **Baudelaire's** poem ***Invitation to the Journey*** (*L'Invitation au voyage*) part of his ***Flowers of Evil*** collection of 1860. The poem is a direct invitation to a loved one to escape with the speaker to an idealised foreign land, characterised by "**order and beauty, luxury, peace and pleasure**". The painting shows a tranquil outdoor scene with including naked

figures resting beside the water, framed by simplified, decorative trees and landscape. Matisse emphasised harmonious colour rhythms and compositional balance, moving beyond naturalistic representation toward a visionary, dreamlike fantasy.

- Critics initially met ***Luxury, Calm and Pleasure*** with mixed reactions: **some praised** its vibrant palette and innovation, while others found it **too radical** in colour and form. Nevertheless, it was a **pivotal work that heralded Fauvism**, a movement characterised by bold colour and emotional directness, in which **Matisse became a leading figure**. The painting's expressive colour use and simplification of form directly influenced modern art's direction, laying the foundation for **Expressionism** and **abstraction**.
- Matisse himself reflected on the challenges of Pointillism noting that breaking colours into spots risked fragmenting form. Yet, **Luxe, Calme et Volupté** beautifully demonstrates his early success in balancing structure with vibrant freedom, embodying his lifelong quest for a pure, serene art.

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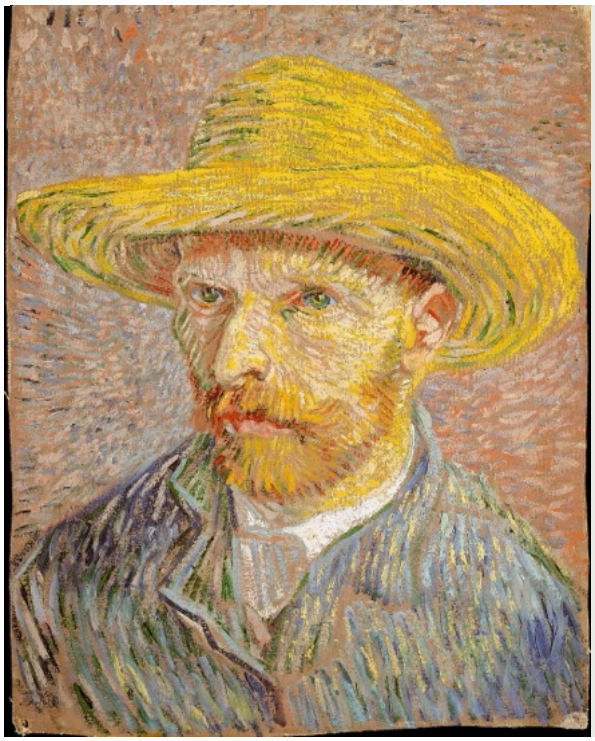

33-01 Neo-Impressionism

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE WWW.SHAFE.UK

Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*, 1887, The Met

- The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of explosive growth in innovative artistic styles and techniques. After Neo-Impressionism, there was **Post-Impressionism**, which developed roughly between 1886 and 1905 with leading artists that included Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh.
- There was also **Fauvism** (c. 1905-1908, Henri Matisse and André Derain), **Expressionism** (c. 1905-1920, Edvard Munch and Wassily Kandinsky), **Cubism** (1907-1914, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque), **Futurism** (1909-1914, Umberto Boccioni), **Dadaism** (1915-1924) and **Surrealism** (1924 onwards, Salvador Dalí and René Magritte).
- I have or will be recording talks on all these movements or artists but for now that brings us to the end of this talk and thank you once again for your time and attention.

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