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"I paint my method", said Seurat, "that's all there is to it". Discuss.

I intend to look at what Seurat might have meant by this statement and I will argue that as well as being an expression of confidence, as has been claimed[1], it was also a statement made to reinforce his claim to be the person who developed pointillism.

We should begin by looking at the original quote and its context. The statement is first reported by Seurat's friend, the painter Charles Angrand, to H.E. Cross in 1891.[2] As it was a reported statement we do not know what Seurat actually said but the full quote is variously translated, often as "People see poetry in what I do. No, I apply my method and that's all."

Before examining the quote in detail I will look at the context, both in terms of Seurat himself and other statements he made and the views of other commentators on the Neo-Impressionists, a term first used by the art critic Fénéon in 1887.[3]

If we look for other statements made by Seurat in order to understand this quote we find very few. According to Signac, he was "very discreet, very reserved. He 'hid' his life".[4] We have a few pages of notes, some letters and remarks he is reported to have made. For example, he wrote notes on a number of Delacroix paintings (1881), a letter to Octave Maus (1889), a letter to Félix Fénéon (1890) and a letter to Maurice Beaubourg (1890).[5] The letter to Octave Maus is only seven sentences discussing the price of two pictures. More interesting are the letters of 1890, the year before his untimely death.

The letter to Félix Fénéon, who recognized and supported Seurat's work early on, is a letter of protest that he wrote to correct what he saw as mistakes in a review

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[1] Leighton, J., Thomson, R. *Seurat and the Bathers* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1997), p. 8.
[2] Gage, J. "The *Technique* of Seurat: A Reappraisal" *Art Bulletin* Vol. 69:3 (1987: Sept.), p. 448, reporting the reference in R. Rey, *La renaissance du sentiment classique*, Paris, 1931, p. 95
[3] Broude, N. *Seurat in Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p.39.
[4] Leighton, 1997, p. 12

Fénéon had written. This is despite the fact that Fénéon had tried to solicit information about their technique from Seurat and Signac but without success.[6] One sentence from Seurat's letter gives a flavour of the content, "I wish to establish the following dates which demonstrate my prior paternity". Although Seurat recognised the debt he owed to Fénéon—"…you who brought me out of the shadows", it is significant that he uses the opportunity to put down a potential rival by adding "—with Signac who benefited from my researches.". Despite his 'discreetness' he was making sure he established himself as the father of pointillism.

The letter to Maurice Beaubourg is regarded as Seurat's 'testament' on his method (it is known as his 'Esthétique').[7] In fact, the letter is about a dozen sentences including, for example, "Art is Harmony" and "Sadness in terms of tonal value is a dominant dark tonality; in terms of colour, a cold dominant colour; and in terms of line, downward directions." Not a great deal can be ascertained through an analysis of this. As the artist Amédée Ozenfant pointed out "Seurat has said that 'art is harmony'—which can mean everything or nothing."[8]

In contrast the reports of conversations with Seurat describe how he would "speak animatedly…in a literary manner and at considerable length"[9], "was sincere…never belittled others…"[10] and, significantly "He believed in the power of theories, in the absolute value of methods, and in the lasting effects of revolutions."[11] The feeling that comes across from a wide range of such reports is a quiet and caring person who thought deeply about his art and was trying to take it forward in a new direction. This view is supported by another reported quote of Seurat's "I painted

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[5] All translated in Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 1978, p. 13-19.
[6] Smith, P. *Seurat and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p.23.
[7] The letter was not published until the early 1920's and corrects a statement made by Seurat and published in March or April 1890 in the concluding section of Jules Christophe's biography of Seurat. As Seurat states in the letter that he wished to correct mistakes in the biographical version the letter is now taken as the definitive version of his theory.
[8] Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 1978, p. 54.
[9] Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 1978, p.21, reporting Gustave Kahn, French Symbolist poet and editor.
[10] Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 1978, p. 28, reporting Émile Verhaeren, Belgian poet and critic.
[11] Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 1978, p. 31, reporting Teodor de Wyzewa, Symbolist writer and critic.

like that because I wanted to get through to something new - a kind of painting that was my own".[12]

One can only assume that he found it difficult to write about his ideas. We must therefore consider Seurat's method based on his work and the large amount of commentary by contemporary writers and art historians since.

The essence of his method is immediately apparent from looking at any of his major paintings from the *Grande Jatte*[13] onwards. The technique of painting using small strokes, blobs or dots of colour is called pointillism.[14] It should be noted that although there are some precursors to this technique the extreme care with which it was employed by Seurat on the *Grande Jatte* was new. For example, the *Baignade*[15] uses small brush strokes and creates a luminous atmosphere but the few obvious dots of colour on the painting were actually added by Seurat following the painting's return from New York in 1887. Fénéon also refers to four other artists who used the technique at this time, a point I cover later.

The use of dots of colour was based on Seurat's belief that it would lead to a heightened luminosity.[16] This belief was based on experience and artistic experimentation and the semi-scientific work published by various nineteenth century authors including Ogden Rood and Michel-Eugène Chevreul based on the scientific work of Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz and James Clerk Maxwell published earlier in the century. The term 'semi-scientific' is not used in a derogatory way but to distinguish between the theoretical work on optics and colour arising from the work of Newton and others, and the work that was done on the subjective perception of colour arising from the work of Goethe and others. The later work was useful in industry and to artists as it related to how colours are perceived.

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[12] Russell J. *Seurat* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1965), p.11.
[13] Un Dimanche d'Été à l'Ile de la Grande Jatte, May 1884 - May 1886.
[14] Grove Art, http://www.artnet.com/library/06/0682/T068278.ASP, "Pointillism - technique of employing a point, or small dot, of colour to create the maximum colour intensity in a Neo-Impressionist canvas…Seurat favoured the term 'chromo-luminarism'…Paul Signac…offered an alternative term…Divisionism refers to the separation of colour into individual strokes of pigment, in accord with colour theories, rather than to the points themselves."
[15] Une Baignade, Asnières, 1883-1884, retouched c.1887.
[16] This is suggested by Fénéon; see Gage, 1987, p. 448.

Individual small and separate touches of colour on the canvas reflect light of that colour and these colours mingle together on the retina. Rather than the subtractive mixing of pigments it is an additive mingling of the type obtained with coloured lights.[17] Even a brief summary of colour theory is not possible within the bounds of this essay[18] so I will summarise the 'popular science' theories of colour that were an influence on Seurat.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century scientific theories of colour were discussed by many artists. According to his letter to Fénéon previously mentioned and as reported by Herbert[19], Seurat began reading Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des arts du dessin* in 1876 and although we have no other evidence this was true it seems likely that he did have some awareness of the work. Blanc, referring to both Chevreul and Delacroix, constructs a theory of optical mixing in which he claims separate touches of pigment will form more pure and luminous colours in the observer's eye than if they are mixed on the palette. Through Blanc Seurat learned of Chevreul and his claim that adjacent areas of complementary colours enhance their value. Through Blanc he also learned of Delacroix's use of optical mixing.

[17] See Fénéon's description in Russell, 1965, p. 181.

[18] This footnote gives a brief summary of some colour theories. There are many surprising facts about colour and many misunderstanding. Colour is something we, and other creatures, perceive as a synthesis of the reaction of receptors sensitive to part of the electromagnetic spectrum. In our eyes it is now known there are three colour pigments in the cone receptors of the retina that are sensitive in the blue, green and red areas of the spectrum. However, their spectral sensitivity response curves overlap significantly and it is misleading to regard them as *the* primary colours. In fact, with the colour mixing of lights (known as additive) any colour can be made from any three different colours as long as no two of the colours can be used to create the third (see Feynman p. 35-6). Every set of three primary colours requires negative amounts of some colours and there is therefore no unique way to define a primary. In elementary textbooks they are said to be red, green and blue but that is because they can be used to create a wide range of colours without using negative colours. This is why they are chosen as the three colours for TV and computer screens (called RGB).
When mixing coloured pigments (known as subtractive) the physics is more complex because of the absorption properties of different materials. In colour printing the colours most often used are cyan, magenta, and yellow (called CMY) which mixed together should give black but pigment deficiencies mean that a fourth black pigment (CMYB) is often added. Artists typically use more colours for convenience and because of the limitations of pigments.
Since the seventeenth century there have been two schools of thought regarding colour, one supported by the experimental physicists and arising from the work of Newton and the other concerned with colour perception and arising from the work of Goethe. These developed into the apparently conflicting theories of Young-Helmholtz and Hering. It is now agreed that both theories describe features of our colour vision, the Young-Helmholtz theory relates to our understanding of the three colour sensitive pigments in the cone receptors and the Hering theory relates to the neural processing of the receptor signals in two opponent neural channels and a single achromatic channel. Finally, the counter-intuitive results of the colour perception experiments performed by Land between the 1950s and 1970s show that our understanding of colour is still very limited.

[19] Herbet, R.L. *Seurat Drawings and Paintings*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), page 8.

Blanc also said that if the observer was close enough for the separate blobs to just be perceived they would “vibrate”, an effect which Blanc praised. Seurat read Delacroix’s journals and made notes on his use of colour mixing in his paintings. Delacroix’s puzzlement over why blobs of blue and yellow failed to produce green could have prepared Seurat to see in his French translation of Rood’s *Modern Chromatics* an answer to the problem. He mentions in his letter to Fénéon that Rood’s book had been brought to his attention in 1881 (the year it was published in France).

Rood’s chief lesson was to make clear the distinction between coloured lights and coloured pigments. Blue and yellow pigments remove the blue and yellow components of the light leaving the colour between them in the spectrum, green, but blue and yellow lights combine to make grey. Rood was an amateur painter and his ‘scientific’ advice to avoid earth tones and black, to use optical mixing, his recommendation to use complementary colours, and the virtues of decisiveness, clear structure and idealised form all supported Seurat’s predilections.[20]

The scientific nature of these findings could have had a special resonance with Seurat. As Herbert says, Seurat lived at a time of positivism, when it was believed that observation and measurement would lead to a complete understanding of the world and I believe this gave these theories a special appeal to a young artist “trying to get through to something new”.

The other appeal of what appeared to be a mechanical style of painting was political. As mechanical production was anathema to notions of fine taste and ‘high art’ it was associated with popular art forms, a ‘democratic’ predilection and radical political leanings.[21]

However, as Herbert points out[22], in 1881 and 1882 Seurat’s oil paintings were still in the Barbizon tradition and it was not until 1883 that his palette lightened and not

[20] Herbert, 2001, p. 9.
[21] Broude, N. “New Light on Seurat’s ‘Dot’: Its Relation to Photo-Mechanical Colour Printing in France in the 1880’s” *Art Bulletin* Vol. 56:4, (1974: Dec.), p. 588.
[22] Herbert, 2001, p. 9.

until he started *Grande Jatte* in 1884 that he started to use separate blobs of complementary colour in a clear, conscious manner.

The semi-scientific basis of the use of complementary colours to achieve luminosity through retinal mixing should not be taken as a justification for Seurat to start using his new style in 1884. In fact, experiments on panels of colour by Webster[23] show that although, for example, small dots of orange on green enliven and give warmth to an area when they can be seen, at a distance there is no discernable difference between a green panel with and without orange dots. Seurat would have been aware of the limitations of the technique and it is likely, as has been pointed out by Gage, that he experimented continuously.[24] Although Seurat claims "…scientifically, with the experience of art, I have been able to find the laws of pictorial colour…"[25] Homer's analysis of his preserved physical palette suggests Seurat's technique was based more on his artist's eye than "by consulting a collection of ponderous text-books and colour charts".[26]

Seurat's letter to Fénéon was written on 20 June 1890, six years after he had started to use the pointillist technique and it seems that it was written to establish his primacy in all areas concerned with pointillism. It is perhaps hard to understand today but when Fénéon wrote the first serious review of the works of the Neo-Impressionists after the 8th Impressionists Exhibition of 1886 he mentions "Messieurs Georges Seurat, Camille and Lucien Pissarro, Dubois-Pillet, and Paul Signac divide the tone in a conscious and scientific manner". By 1890 other artists had joined the bandwagon and I believe Seurat must have felt that he was in danger of being undervalued or overlooked as the true originator of the movement.

In 1887 Fénéon, writing about Neo-Impressionism, says: "among the throng of mechanical copyists of externals, these four or five artists produce the very effect of life". However, once a throng gathers it is easy to loose sight of the leaders. His letter to Fénéon in 1890 and his famous remark quoted in the title in 1891 appear

[23] A 1944 article by Webster called *The Technique of Impressionism: A Reappraisal* is included in Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 1978, p. 93-102.
[24] Gage, *Art Bulletin* Sept. 1987, p. 451.
[25] Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, p. 22.
[26] W.I. Homer, *Notes on Seurat's Palette*, 1959, in Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, p 116-120.

to me to be a well justified claim to be seen as the originator of the method and the movement.

Seurat is often seen narrowly as a ‘scientific painter’ but “at the end his life nearly all his ‘science’ was still based on his boyhood reading of Charles Blanc".[27] Seurat is a great painter not because of his scientific method or his literary efforts at self-justification but through the luminous power of his large canvases and the soft quality of his drawings.

I have focused on Seurat's use of colour but he was innovative in many other ways. His use of line, tone, the spatial separation of planes, particularly in his later works and his use of ratios when laying out the picture space, his use of geometrical contours, and the relationship between his work and music have all been discussed, for example by Herbert, Prak and by Smith. Seurat can be seen as laying the groundwork for Fauvism, Art Nouveau and even Cubism. All of these analyses add interesting information to the corpus of work on Seurat but the central aspect of what is known as Seurat’s method is his creation of what we call pointillism.

Returning finally to the quote itself, its meaning is still obscure. It is the reported statement of a quiet man who thought deeply and cared passionately about his art and developed a new technique for painting towards the end of the nineteenth century. As previously mentioned Leighton took the quote to be simply an expression of confidence in his own abilities but I feel there are further layers of meaning to be revealed.

It is interesting that the full quote first refers to poetry. The word poetry hints at imagination and an inner world of meaning and perhaps therefore to the Symbolists. This is followed by a strong denial that it should be understood this way and a “setting the record straight” bold statement that he uses his method and nothing more. Was he trying to distance himself from the Symbolists?

[27] Herbert, 2001, p.3.

The word ‘method’ hints at a scientific method, that is, one founded on experimentation and physical reality, not on either “doing what comes naturally” or on dreams, imagination or mythology. He emphasises his ownership of the method and the distinction between its creation and its application, both of which he owns. He finally rules out the possibility that his method is simply a narrow technique that is part of a larger perhaps more spiritual message with the phrase ‘that’s all’.

It is a bold statement that stakes a claim of ownership of something (‘my method’) that has comprehensive applicability. The implication is that the method is all that is required to create a work of art. The term implies a logical, consistent, rule-based approach to the production of art. It therefore is a statement that indirectly claims to unite science and art in a grand synthesis and a codified system that Seurat has uniquely created. The appeal to universality harks back to classical art and Platonic ideals. Plato saw mathematics as being the unifying system that could explain the world including music and the other arts. Seurat appears to see his method in a similar way. In fact, one aspect of this, the relationship between Seurat’s art and music, has been explored by Smith in his chapter on Painting as Music (p. 141). The other supporting evidence is the claim by de Wyzewa, following a number of meetings with Seurat, that “He believed in the power of theories...I very clearly felt Seurat’s kinship with the Leonardos, The Dűrers, the Poussins…”[28]

The statement as a speech act can be seen both as modest (denying power), as it implies that what he does is the application of a simple method, or as arrogant (claiming and asserting power), as he creates great works of art through a scientific method that he has created and owns. Despite his reserve he did not want anyone else to claim what he saw as his creation, a new school of art. So the quote could be seen as an arrogant statement phrased in a modest way.

As van Gogh wisely pointed out it was unlikely that Seurat’s technique would become a universal dogma but it “will become in time even more personal and

[28] Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 1978, p.148.

even more original".[29] He was right, pointillism faded away as a technique but Seurat's work lives on in his unique, moving and monumental canvases.

[29] Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 1978, p. 49.

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School of History of Art, Film and Visual Media

COURSE WORK ASSESSMENT

BA LEVEL ONE (YEAR ONE)

Name of Student Laurence Shafe Date 31/01/2004

Course Unit BA History of Art, Introduction to Modern Art

Brief Title of Essay "I paint my method," said Seurat, "that's all there is to it."

Discuss.

Marker _____

Marking Scheme: *Excellent* *Good* *Satisfactory* *Weak* *Poor*

I confirm that this essay is my own work and that ideas developed from other sources have been duly acknowledged.

Comments: