



RADIANCE

THE NEO-IMPRESSIONISTS

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Henri-Edmond CROSS
French 1856–1910
Mediterranean shores
(*Bords méditerranéens*) 1895 (detail)
oil on canvas
65.0 x 92.0 cm
Collection of Lenora and
Walter F. Brown, San Antonio, Texas
Photo: Steven Tucker

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Georges SEURAT
French 1859–91
Bec du Hoc, Grandcamp
(*Le Bec du Hoc, Grandcamp*) 1885
oil on canvas
64.8 x 81.6 cm
Tate, London (N06067)
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Essay by Marina Ferretti Bocquillon

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Guest Curator : *Radiance: The Neo-Impressionists*

The story of Neo-Impressionism begins in 1884, when Georges Seurat (1859–1891) first met Paul Signac (1863–1935). Radically different in terms of their background and temperament, the two young artists met at the inaugural group exhibition of the Artistes Indépendants, which had been formed in protest against the restrictive selection criteria of the annual Paris Salon jury. Seurat was 24 and looking for sound rules by which to regulate beauty since, he argued, ‘art is harmony’. A graduate of the école des Beaux-Arts, in 1884 he showed at the Artistes Indépendants his first

large figure composition, *Bathers at Asnières* (London, National Gallery), a work rejected by the Salon jury, in which he gave a scene from modern daily life – working-class men bathing in the Seine in an industrial suburb on the outskirts of central Paris – the dimensions of a history painting. The works of the young Seurat are distinguished by an insistent geometry; and, from 1882–83 in his studies painted directly before the motif, a systematic arrangement of touches of colour can be discerned, bringing a uniformity to the surfaces of his compositions that stamps them with a singular unity.



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Paul SIGNAC
 French 1863–1935
Gasometers at Clichy
 (*Les gazomètres. Clichy*) 1886
 oil on canvas
 65.0 x 81.0 cm
 National Gallery of Victoria,
 Melbourne
 Felton Bequest, 1948



The Seine at Courbevoie, a work painted by Seurat during his study trips to the Island of La Grande Jatte, close by Asnières, is one of Neo-Impressionism's first achievements. Here for the first time Seurat put into practice his fundamental principle of the division of tones, whereby the painter places individual touches of pure colour side by side on the canvas, allowing the viewer's retina to complete the work, at a distance, of combining these tones together. This idea, applied with varying degrees of rigour, and which was to be dubbed Neo-Impressionism by the critic Félix Fénéon in 1886, proliferated until Seurat's death in 1891. Over the subsequent twenty years, from 1891 to 1910, the Neo-Impressionist technique was gradually liberated through the impetus of Signac, evolving towards more vibrant colouristic effects.

In 1884 the twenty-year-old Paul Signac was a largely self-taught painter. A visit to an exhibition of Monet's work in June 1880 had led to his decision to become a painter himself, and he very quickly assimilated the Impressionist technique. His sensibility was perfectly attuned to the freedom afforded by Impressionism's principle of working outdoors to capture light and striking colours. This did not prevent him, like Seurat, from preferring frontal and organised compositions, with a limited use of perspective that emphasised the surface treatment of his paintings. Enamoured of colour, Signac was as extraverted as Seurat was self-absorbed in his approach. He was soon dubbed the Saint Paul of Neo-Impressionism, since it was Signac who disseminated the theory of the division of tones to wider audiences.

In spite of their differences, the two artists shared in common a taste for compositional rigour, a love of modernity, and the ambition to be innovators. Their friendship linked by a fascination with optical treatises and the study of colour perception, Seurat and Signac worked together to perfect a new aesthetic language, seeking to objectively describe the modern world with the new visual expression that was best suited to it.

Like most large European cities, Paris spread outwards during the second half of the nineteenth century. On its outskirts, new residential districts rubbed shoulders with industrial zones. This new landscape attracted leisure-seeking Parisians, and the banks of the Seine became a favourite destination for a rapidly expanding population. Signac, a devotee of sailing whose mother lived at Asnières, found here the simultaneous pleasures of boating and painting in the open air. Signac's *The front of The Tub, Opus 176* looks upstream from Asnières towards the Island of La Grande Jatte. A popular spot for strollers, La Grande Jatte was the site chosen by Seurat as the setting for the painting that was to become the icon of Neo-Impressionism, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884–86, Chicago, The Art Institute).

During the winter of 1885–86, Seurat reworked this painting completely using his new system of divided colour tones. His method was immediately adopted by Signac, who painted in March to April 1886 *Gasometers at Clichy* (National Gallery of Victoria), his first landscape to strictly adhere to Neo-Impressionist principles. In May 1886 Seurat and Signac, along with Camille and Lucien Pissarro, showed their first 'divisionist' works – arranged around Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* at the eighth and final group Impressionist exhibition. Neo-Impressionist emulators soon appeared in France and Belgium, attracted as much by the movement's novel technique as by its scientific grounding.

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Maximilien LUCE
 French 1858–1941
The Louvre and the Pont du Carrousel, night effect
 (*Le Louvre et le Pont du Carrousel, effet de nuit*) 1890
 oil on canvas
 63.5 x 81.3 cm
 Collection Lenora and Walter F. Brown
 Photo: Steven Tucker

City Lights and the Birth of the Suburbs

Since the Second Empire (1852–1870), Paris had been a vast building site. Having seen their urban fabric remodelled by the civic planner Baron Haussmann, Parisians next witnessed the completion of Baltard's renovation of the Les Halles markets and the construction of the Eiffel Tower. For many artists, however, the epicentre of Paris remained the studio, where models posed and they elaborated ever more ambitious compositions. Neo-Impressionist painters had an approach to their art that was radically different from their Impressionist predecessors. They were committed to working progressively, utilising drawings, painted studies and preliminary sketches in a methodical manner that realigned them with classical painting traditions.

The city also became the backdrop for new exhibitions. Refusing now to even to submit their works to the jury of the official Salon, young painters exhibited instead with the new Salon des Artistes Indépendants in Paris, which had become an annual event following the first showing of the Groupe des Artistes Indépendants in 1884; or with the Cercle des XX (Circle of the 20), an exhibiting body established by progressive artists in Brussels. Seurat sent seven paintings to the 1887 Les XX exhibition, including *The Bec du Hoc, Grandcamp*, thereby inspiring a number of Belgian artists (Willy Finch, Georges Lemmen, Théo Van Rysselberghe) to begin painting in the Neo-Impressionist manner.

Paris was also a place of entertainment and encounter for the Neo-Impressionist artists, who regularly met in cafés and attended newly fashionable venues like the circus and the cabaret. Louis Hayet was especially drawn to these venues, his *In the café 1888* capturing well the comforting fug of a Parisian watering-hole. By night, gas lighting illuminated another face of the capital. The nocturnal poetry of the city's street lamps especially seduced Maximilien Luce, resulting in seductive paintings like *The Louvre and the Pont du Carrousel, night effect 1890*.



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Landscape, Marines, Social Engagement and Portraiture

The young Neo-Impressionist painters had inherited from their Impressionist elders a pronounced love of analysing and interpreting the light found in the Ile-de-France region. Often devoid of human presence, the landscapes of Albert Dubois-Pillet and Henri-Edmond Cross, the Belgian painters Willy Finch, Henry Van de Velde or Théo Van Rysselberghe, as well as the Dutchman Johannes Toorop, were ordered according to a simple geometry where the study of light became the true subject of the painting. Their works express a detached, almost abstract poetry, summarising with nuanced harmony the individual temperament of each artist. Certain artists were also preoccupied with social justice, George Morren in Belgium and Maximilien Luce in France in particular becoming eulogists for the world's workers.

Thanks to the development of the railways, Parisians discovered the charms of Normandy's and Brittany's beaches. Like Monet, Seurat and Signac regularly summered at the seaside where they painted marine views – the grand compositions that Seurat called his 'battle paintings' being reserved for winters spent working in the studio in Paris.

These marine scapes, often reductive studies of pure line and colour, are a pinnacle of Neo-Impressionism. Painters here gave free rein to their love for analysing light and developing refined chromatic harmonies in which the lightest touch vibrates the surface of the canvas. The formal purity of these canvases gives them an almost musical poetry; in fact, not content with assigning these paintings an Opus number, Signac frequently endowed them with secondary titles evoking the rhythm of a musical score.

After Seurat's death in 1891, Signac took Neo-Impressionism's destiny firmly in hand. In the same year Henri-Edmond Cross moved to the Midi region in the south of France, where he led a hermit-like existence in Cabasson. Signac in turn discovered Saint-Tropez in 1892. Thereafter he spent part of every year here, and he also encouraged friends to discover this region. Maximilien Luce visited him here in 1893, painting his luminous *The port of Saint-Tropez*; and Théo Van Rysselberghe would also be drawn to live on the shores of the Mediterranean. In 1895 Signac's technique developed a sudden new freedom – his brushstrokes became broader, bringing a stronger force to his use of colour. His works now took on the lustre of mosaics, gaining a raw new power that compensated for any loss of refinement and complexity.



The human figure is the major subject throughout the history of western painting, and the Neo-Impressionists did not neglect this subject, addressing it in major compositions, as well as in the numerous portrait studies they have left us. The Belgian artists Théo Van Rysselberghe and Georges Lemmen are considered to be the movement's principal portraitists. *Girl in a straw hat (Portrait of Elisabeth van Rysselberghe)* 1901, a summertime study of the artist's eleven-year-old daughter, is a fine example.

Théo VAN RYSELBERGHE
Belgian 1862–1926, worked in France 1897–1926
Girl in a straw hat (Portrait of Elisabeth Van Rysselberghe)

(Jeune fille au chapeau de paille (Portrait d'Elisabeth Van Rysselberghe)) 1901
oil on canvas
81.0 x 70.0 cm
Private collection

Maximilien LUCE
French 1858–1941
The port of Saint-Tropez (Le Port de Saint-Tropez) 1893
oil on canvas
73.7 x 91.4 cm
Private Collection

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Maximilien LUCE
 French 1858-1941
Saint-Tropez, the cemetery road
 (Saint-Tropez, la route du cimetière)
 1892
 oil on canvas
 54,0 x 65,0 cm
 Private Collection

Neo-Impressionism in the 20th Century

In 1899, Signac published *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme* (From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism), a treatise that explained the tenets of divisionist painting, examining it within an historical perspective. Translated into German and often reprinted, this study was read by a new generation of artists who were obsessed with both colour and aesthetic theory – notably, Kandinsky. Matisse stayed at Saint-Tropez in 1904 and for a brief period worked with the division of colour tones. Around this time, Mondrian worked alongside Toorop at Domburg in Holland. In Paris, Balla and Severini also experimented with the application of small blocks of pure colour. While after Cross's death in 1910 Signac remained the sole exponent of Neo-Impressionism's original form, the legacy of his and Seurat's experiments with colour division in the 1880's now bore fruit with the emergence of Fauvism and Abstraction, two new movements in modern art that were clearly indebted to Neo-Impressionism.



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