Signac, Paul (1863-1935)

Paul Signac was a prolific French Neo-Impressionist painter during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His friendship with Georges Seurat defined the early part of his career, in which he explored Pointillist and Divisionist painting methods. Interested by the laws and theories of physiological optics, Signac experimented with the effects of light and purposeful juxtaposition of colour on canvas to produce effects in the eye of the viewer. Through the application of small, deliberate brushstrokes, Signac furthered the development of Neo-Impressionist painting techniques. Signac and Seurat practiced their theories of contrasting colour through ‘Pointillism’, the application of small dabs or dots of paint in calculated compositions. Following the death of Seurat in 1891 Signac turned from oil painting to watercolour, he began to incorporate broader brushstrokes. Signac defined his new method as Divisionist rather than Pointillist. Signac focused his attention primarily on the promotion and dissemination of Divisionism and Neo-Impressionism. He travelled throughout Europe, often staying in St. Tropez, and commonly painted seascapes, harbours, and ports. From 1908 until his death in 1935, he held the post of President of the Société des Artistes Indépendants. In his mature years, his style became more fluid and bold and less scientific; the enthusiastic and charismatic Signac greatly influenced other post-Impressionist painters including Vincent Van Gogh and Henri Matisse.

Born in 1863 to a Parisian bourgeois family, Paul Signac demonstrated an interest in painting at a young age. He frequented Impressionist exhibitions in the late 1870s and, in June 1880, a visit to the Monet exhibition at the offices of *La Vie Moderne* inspiredSignac to begin working in the Impressionist manner of open-air painting. Alongside Charles Angrand and Henri-Edmond Cross, Signac founded and would later become President of the *Groupe des Artistes Independants*, a position in which he remained until his death in 1935. The group rebelled against the traditions of the Academy and held its own Salons to exhibit the work of its members.

Signac’s friendship with Seurat changed the trajectory of his career; they first met in 1884 at the founding meeting of the *Groupe des Artistes Independants*. Seurat encouraged Signac to explore the laws of physiological optics and the scientific texts of Charles Blanc and David Sutter. He defined his working methods as a ‘scientisation’ of Impressionist painting, through promoting optical theories of pure colour and methodical division of light in painting. Signac searched for the accord of the contrast of complementary colours in diametric pairings.

Seurat’s untimely death in 1891 devastated Signac and began a new phase in his life and career. He moved to Saint-Tropez in 1892, where his work became intertwined with that of Henri-Edmond Cross. Here, Signac moved from outdoor painting to his studio. Signac’s propagation of Neo-Impressionism advanced the evolution of European modernism; his experimentation and theories of colour harmonies provided a basis for the Fauvists and Cubists of the early twentieth century.

**References and further reading**

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