**Neo-Impressionism**

Neo-Impressionism (1886-1906) comprised a group of avant-garde painters in France who explored a systematic approach to painting that revived Classical ideals while critiquing Impressionism’s prevailing aesthetic of spontaneity and improvisation. Led by the young, Parisian-born Georges Seurat, a rebellious École des Beaux-Arts-trained painter and anarchist, the Neo-Impressionists first gained attention at the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1886. There, Seurat and his student Paul Signac, accompanied by the older Camille Pissarro, and his son Lucien, staged their bold new work. Its centerpiece was Seurat’s monumental *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-86), a visual manifesto to Neo-Impressionist precepts. In his review, art critic and activist Félix Fénéon coined the label *néo-impressionisme* to describe compositions that forcefully advanced Impressionism’s vibrant colouristic experiments. He detailed Seurat’s method of juxtaposing small, regularized touches of adjacent and complementary colours as “optical painting.” Termed ‘divisionism’, unblended pigments would theoretically “recombine on the retina” of the observer, resulting in a brilliant synthesis of hue and light on the painted surface. The methodical application of dots was termed ‘pointillism’.

Seurat’s approach drew upon a scientistic study of nineteenth-century treatises on colour theory and optics, which clarified how material colours (pigments) could never achieve the luminosity of light’s colour spectrum. Seurat looked to chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul (*On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colours*, 1839), French scientist and philosopher Charles Henry (who developed a body of theory called psychophysics, which aimed to unite science and aesthetics), and American physicist Ogden Rood, whose *Modern* *Chromatics* (1879) provided artists with practical insights. Seurat favoured the term “chromo-luminism” (also coined by Signac) and adapted his laborious method to an astonishing variety of forms and themes, including bourgeois scenes of modern Parisian leisure, such as *Grand Jatte,* and the large canvas that first gained him prominence at the Society of Independent Artists exhibition, the suburban working class idyll *Bathers at Asnières* (1884).

Neo-Impressionism was less a rejection of Impressionism than a politically-motivated aesthetic reform. Fénéon’s appellation paid homage to the intransigent nature that Pissarro, Claude Monet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Berthe Morisot and others brought to French *en plein air* painting. However, the Neo-Impressionists inverted the reliance on impressions, choosing to delineate perception (the Idea) by coupling objectivity with the artist’s thoughtful insight. Seurat and his disciples built up surfaces slowly and methodically, creating a mosaic-like “patient tapestry” of deliberate dots and dashes, emphasizing craft and eliminating gesture. The Impressionists’ manner, while committed to rational vision, remained fluid, fugitive, and even arbitrary. Fénéon wrote of Seurat’s procedure: “let the hand be numb, but let the eye be agile, perspicacious, cunning,” alluding to the moralizing doctrine that shaped the movement. In addition to Seurat, Signac, and the Pissarros, he claimed Albert Dubois, Charles Angrand, Louis Hayet, Henri Edmond Cross, Léo Gausson, Hippolyte Petitjean and Maximilien Luce as Neo-Impressionists.

With the exception of Monet (whose experiments with seriality extended his practice into the twentieth century), Impressionism had by the mid-to-late 1880s dissipated. Its formal inventions of the previous twenty years had embraced essential aspects of modernity, namely instinct, contemporaneity, and the fleeting moment. Neo-Impressionism’s contrary view tempered the flux of modern life with a Classical permanence and rigour as its artists looked to past pictorial traditions while anticipating fin de siècle countercultural movements. The new painters thus brought back conventional studio procedures, holding that a finished work required extensive planning. They found Impressionist empiricism insufficient to capture a “superior, sublimated reality” in which the artists’ personalities would ideally be transformed. Moreover, the Neo-Impressionists’ conviction in correspondences between pictorial forms and specific emotions or expressive qualities - popularized by the Romantic poet Charles Baudelaire - philosophically aligned them closer to Symbolism and that movement’s focus on interiority.

Seurat’s pictorial range drew the attention of avant-garde Symbolist poets and writers, including Gustave Kahn and Stéphane Mallarmé, whom he met through the enthusiastic Fénéon. His poetic and visionary drawings, such as *Portrait of Edmond François Aman-Jean* (1882-83), foreshadow pointillism and relate to the idiosyncratic Odilon Redon. The Symbolists saw in Seurat’s work a timeless monumentality that evoked the hieratic, reflective, and formally flattened forms of the early Renaissance, Ancient Egypt and Greece. Similarly, the celebrated Pierre Puvis de Chavannes - known for his large-scale decorative schemes depicting historical and mythological figures in Classical landscapes - chiefly inspired the Neo-Impressionists’ reliance on historical models and motifs. Frieze-like compositions [*Grand Jatte, Models* (Poseuses)*, In the Time of Harmony*] represented “a collective society at rest” enjoying pure contemplation and calm.Henry’s studies on the psychology of art also profoundly affected the Neo-Impressionists’ belief in art’s social and communal function, one providing visual harmony and happiness.Influenced by the Russian aristocrat and communist Pyotr Kropotkin, whose political writings in the 1880s popularized the socialist views of William Morris, Signac likewise emphasized the significance of art in everyday life and its rhetorical function within the revolution. Ruminative scenes of both city and country life clarified an urgent class consciousness, albeit one embedded in aesthetic congruity rather than agitprop. When advancing harmony as a goal, Signac meant not only an aesthetic of the decorative and the primitive - a hearty nod to Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin - but the anarchist belief in a natural way of life that was harmonious, free, and not found under modern capitalism. In his mural-scale *In the Time of Harmony* (1893-95) Signac represented a Provençal landscape as a left-wing paradise, reworking traditional pastoral devices to exemplify the values of education, farm labor, free love, and health.

The movement’s visibility in Paris spread to Brussels through the avant-garde exhibition society, Les XX (The Twenty, founded by critic Octave Maus in 1883), which promoted works of Neo-Impressionism, Symbolism and Art Nouveau. Les XX emphasized relationships among the visual and decorative arts, music, and literature, and served as a model for modern twentieth-century movements such as the Vienna Secession (1897-1905). Seurat’s untimely death in 1891 temporarily halted Neo-Impressionism in France; however, the publication of Signac’s *D’Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme* (1899) instigated a revival. By the end of the century, Neo-Impressionists sought authenticity in utopias in St. Tropez, Collioure, and Marseille in the Mediterranean south (see Henri-Edmond Cross’s atmospheric *Les Iles d'Or* [The Golden Isles]). Henri Matisse, for one, spent a summer in St. Tropez with Signac and Cross in 1904, where he painted his pivotal *Luxe, calme et volupté*, signaling Neo-Impressionism’s influence on Fauvism.

**Further Reading**

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**Images:**

- Georges Seurat, *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte,* 1884-86.

Oil on canvas, 81 3/4 x 121 1/4 in. (207.5 x 308.1 cm)

Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection

1926.224

The Art Institute of Chicago

[http://www.artinstituteimages.org/searchresults.asp?X5=27992](https://owa.dur.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=E43_TR1EukakN5EPa0dp9qGatE-9U9EIPkhTBR9cl8YcFAvZavjqqv43VCfEhxr841IsUh7zR6Y.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.artinstituteimages.org%2fsearchresults.asp%3fX5%3d27992" \t "_blank)

- Georges Seurat, *Bathers at Asnières* (*Une Baignade, Asnières*), 1884.

Oil on canvas, 201 × 300 cm (79.1 × 118.1 in)

National Gallery, London

(NG3908)

photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

[http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/georges-seurat-bathers-at-asnieres](https://owa.dur.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=E43_TR1EukakN5EPa0dp9qGatE-9U9EIPkhTBR9cl8YcFAvZavjqqv43VCfEhxr841IsUh7zR6Y.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.nationalgallery.org.uk%2fpaintings%2fgeorges-seurat-bathers-at-asnieres" \t "_blank)

- Georges Seurat, *Aman-Jean (Portrait of Edmond François Aman-Jean),* 1882–83

Conté crayon on Michallet paper, 24 1/2 x 18 11/16 in. (62.2 x 47.5 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Credit Line: Bequest of Stephen C. Clark, 1960 Accession Number: 61.101.16

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/61.101.16](https://owa.dur.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=E43_TR1EukakN5EPa0dp9qGatE-9U9EIPkhTBR9cl8YcFAvZavjqqv43VCfEhxr841IsUh7zR6Y.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.metmuseum.org%2ftoah%2fworks-of-art%2f61.101.16" \t "_blank)

- Georges Seurat, *Models (Poseuses)*,1886–1888

Oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 98 3/8 in. (200 x 249.9 cm)

Image © 2014 The Barnes Foundation

- Paul Signac, *Au temps d'harmonie: l'âge d'or n'est pas dans le passé, il est dans l’avenir* (In the Time of Harmony: The Golden Age Is Not in the Past, It Is in the Future), 1893-95. Oil on canvas.  300 x 400 cm.

Montreuil, Mairie (@ Estate of Paul Signac / ADAGP [Paris] / SODRAC [Montreal] 2003; photo: Alain Llobregat)

[http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=45967](https://owa.dur.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=E43_TR1EukakN5EPa0dp9qGatE-9U9EIPkhTBR9cl8YcFAvZavjqqv43VCfEhxr841IsUh7zR6Y.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.the-athenaeum.org%2fart%2ffull.php%3fID%3d45967" \t "_blank)

- Henri-Edmond Cross, *Les Iles d'Or* (The Golden Isles), ca. 1891-1892

Oil on canvas, H. 59; W. 54 cm

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