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**The Art of Democracy**  
**George Seurat as a Mirror of His Age**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Lai Wei**

to

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis

**The Art of Democracy**

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The thesis discuss about the ideal of democracy in the art of George Seurat, a French Post-Impressionist artist in late 19th Century. Seurat has been commonly read as an artist of “scientific” method. This paper explores the definition and perception of “science” in Seurat’s lived social historical environment. It also evaluates whether his methods are authentically scientific by examining his sources of his methods. My argument is instead of defining Seurat as scientific, “democratic” would be a more accurate description. Seurat’s democratic attitudes are demonstrated by his selection of subject matter, his methods of production, and the influence of popular imagery on his art making. By applying a social art history methodology, this paper examines Seurat’s major works of different stages along with the social historical facts in his age to propose the idea that Seurat is democratic rather than scientific.

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Georges Seurat is known for his scientific method and for creating quasiobjective paintings through a quasimechanical method of presentation. As one of the most significant Postimpressionist artists, he developed methods that were generally accepted to have solved the limitations of Impressionism, one of which, according to Zola, was its lack of a clearly defined basis in science.<sup>1</sup> However, the scientific method Seurat claimed to employ had more sociocultural and political significance than true scientific meaning. The method was not strictly scientific, a result of neither laboratory research nor strictly examined academic theories or inventions. Rather, it is more likely that the use of the word “science” and its significance legitimized Seurat as a powerful successor of and counterpart to the Impressionists.

Scholar Georges Roque has pointed out that among the sources Seurat acknowledged in the development of his color theory, there were no scientific treatises, only writings by art historian and educator Charles Blanc, aesthetician David Sutter, and artists such as Delacroix, Corot, and Couture. Charles Henry’s writings on the “scientific aesthetics” Seurat manifested in his works were published in symbolist and philosophical magazines, not in scientific ones. Blanc referred to science by suggesting that the scientific method was a way of overcoming the weak and unstable nature of color, and “scientific” was one of the most popular words in the late nineteenth century, as was “sensation.” Science is the synthesis of logic, rationality, systematism, objectivity, and democracy. It is both an antonym and supplement of sensation, and it is symbiotic with industrialization, mechanical reproduction, and revolution. Such “science” in art

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<sup>1</sup>. Mary Tompkins Lewis, “A New Landscape Painting for France,” in *Cézanne*, ed. Catherine Dean (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 203.

was a counterpart and solution to the Impressionists' method, which was glorified and limited by its spontaneity, absolute subjectivity, and immediate sensation.<sup>2</sup>

For the artist Seurat, "science" meant being systematic<sup>3</sup> in his method and democratic<sup>4</sup> in his presentation of modern urban life. Seurat's art was the result of objective study and observation, and such objectivity was consistent with the essence of science and with the idea that art should be an objective imitation of nature, which had been a prevailing mindset before Seurat's time. Through the motifs of his paintings, Seurat calmly and comprehensively examined contemporary society. His representation of the Parisian scene was democratically inclusive, as instead of using his artistic subjectivity to render an idealistic image, as Renoir often did, Seurat depicted characters from assorted social classes participating together in collective events or in public. The artist democratically allowed the characters on his canvas to be themselves. The heterogeneity of late nineteenth-century Paris was honestly projected onto the canvas, as Seurat's works frequently remind his spectators of the existence of the *petite bourgeoisie*, a newly emerging class in the nineteenth century, to whom the study of science was more accessible than traditional humanities courses. More or less, Seurat's adaptation of the scientific method alludes to the trend of his time, when those of the middle class, and even the lower middle class, were eager to advance in society.

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<sup>2</sup>. Georges Roque, "Seurat and Color Theory," in *Seurat Re-viewed*, ed. Paul Smith (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 45.

<sup>3</sup>. Seurat did not derive his method from scientific treatises. Being "scientific" was his attempt to study light and color analytically using a method that was deconstructable, step by step, rigorous, and understandable by and applicable to everyone, just as anyone could perform a science experiment by following instructions and receiving certain training.

<sup>4</sup>. The democratic portrayal of urban life refers to the painter's inclusion of subject matter pertaining to all social classes. Seurat did not exclusively focus on rendering the flamboyant urban lives of the upper classes but also reflected aspects of real life by depicting a cross section of mixed classes.



The connotations of “science” were more discursive and political in the sociocultural context of nineteenth-century Europe. At that time, science signified the study of the natural and physical world and was widely applied to all fields.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the study of science was closely related to social hierarchies and class segmentation. In nineteenth-century industrialized Western economies, educational reformers were dissatisfied with the fact that a curriculum of Greek and Latin literature was available exclusively to aristocrats. The colleges of science that opened in the late nineteenth century were aimed toward middle- and working-class students and were meant to allow the new professional classes to adapt to social change and prepare for modern life.<sup>6</sup> The study of science thus became the purview of the middle class, while Latin and Greek remained the traditional curriculum for the higher class. Science signified an eagerness for advancement not only through progress in technology but also through a progressive mind.

The evolution of social perception generally followed closely the development of machines. English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley claimed, “For the purpose of attaining real culture, an exclusively scientific education is at least as effectual as an exclusively literary education.”<sup>7</sup> Huxley was known as a devoted advocate of Darwin’s theory of evolution. His apparent favoritism toward education in science and evolutionism alludes to my idea that science was seen as crucial to understanding humans and modern society. For example, Darwin aimed to scientifically discover the origins of the human race, and the search for those origins had been a convention in religious studies, philosophy, and literature for centuries. Science historian and English literature scholar Laura Otis has pointed out that in English novels of Seurat’s time, the

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<sup>5</sup>. Laura Otis, *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century, an Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), xvii.

<sup>6</sup>. *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>7</sup>. *Ibid.*

search for human origins had long been accepted as a plot-driving device. The concept of “origins” was used in genealogy and to determine one’s proper social position.<sup>8</sup> The conclusions of Darwinism were frighteningly against religion, but curiosity and research about human origins were endemic at the time, and the science of evolutionism simply interpreted the topic using a new approach. In conclusion, science was not opposed to humanity but rather was concerned with inherently human topics. However, the study and rising importance of science signified the rise of the middle and working classes, since it was set up as a counterpart to the exclusively aristocratic and bourgeois study of Latin and Greek literature.

Advocacy for science stemmed from the political left, and this fact seems to provide a hint to Seurat’s political tendencies, though the relatively silent artist was never explicit on political topics. Seurat, the son of Parisian bourgeois parents, had actively associated himself with science, reflecting not only the trend of the times but also a personal tendency toward reform—perhaps not political reform but aesthetic reform. This is suggested by how the symbolist critic T  odor de Wyzewa memorialized Seurat in a short piece written after the artist’s death: “He believed in the power of theories, in the absolute value of methods, in the persistence of revolution.”<sup>9</sup> Science was a nineteenth-century contemporary fashion, a sign of progressiveness, profanity, the middle class, provocativeness, and even the avant-garde. Seurat’s “scientific” method points toward the goal of systemizing aesthetics just as society was systematized. The artist’s scientific approach introduced an advanced method of pictorial representation that was adaptable, approachable, and understandable by everyone, and that method was the result of Seurat’s logic having been consciously formed throughout his life.

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<sup>8</sup>. Otis, *Literature and Science*, xx.

<sup>9</sup>. Paul Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde* (Singapore: MIT Press, 1997), 108.



Seurat's father was Antoine Chrysostome Seurat, a legal official described as being "the classic bourgeois type."<sup>10</sup> Even the art education Seurat received at the *École des Beaux-Arts* from 1878 to 1879 was initially based on bourgeois aesthetics: it strictly followed the doctrines of idealized classical beauty, and Seurat studied the old masters, Poussin, and Ingres to understand precision in lines.<sup>11</sup> Though Neoclassicism was already less popular than Realism and Romanticism at the institution, its influence was profound and overarching.<sup>12</sup> Before entering the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Seurat had already developed a profound interest in the Parthenon friezes and had frequently drawn them since 1875.<sup>13</sup> Seurat remained at the academy for only one year and was known for his controversial political tendencies, as demonstrated by the fact that his peers called him a *communard*.<sup>14</sup>

Charles Blanc's theory influenced Seurat during his education—not only his color theory but also his theory on the morality of art. In his book *Seurat*, art historian Richard Thomson states, "Painting has a moral effect on us because it moves us and because it can arouse in us either noble aspirations or beneficial regret."<sup>15</sup> Blanc's theory had been inspired by Kant's theory of aesthetic judgements, but Blanc seemed to have contradicted Kant's argument that aesthetic experience gives rise to disinterested pleasure and has no value, asserting, "It is possible for a moral idea to stand out from a beautiful work of art."<sup>16</sup> To solve this paradox, Blanc proposed

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<sup>10</sup>. Richard Thomson, *Seurat* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 9.

<sup>11</sup>. *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>12</sup>. Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 149.

<sup>13</sup>. Thomson, *Seurat*, 15.

<sup>14</sup>. Stephen Eisenman, "Mass Culture and Utopia, Seurat and Neoimpressionism," in *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, eds. Stephen F. Eisenman and Thomas Crow (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2007), 368.

<sup>15</sup>. Thomson, *Seurat*, 19.

<sup>16</sup>. Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 11.

that art does instruct spectators in morality but that any moral effect “depends upon the spectators who release it.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Blanc further stated, “Art is useful to society because it tames our behavior. It tempers man’s roughness simply by making him a spectacle to himself.”<sup>18</sup> Proudhon, a French anarchist philosopher who supported Courbet’s Realism, similarly promoted the idea of making people less rough by exposing their behavior to society, an idea that was reflected in many of Seurat’s works, for example, in *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–1886) (Fig.1), through the absence of fathers on the canvas, as we shall see.

Aside from his classical training at the academy, Seurat studied contemporary social culture and class stratification. He frequently visited the Buttes-Chaumont, a park for working-class Parisians, and also spent time at Le Raincy, a suburban middle-class residential area to which his father would retreat. In his leisure time, he frequented the Île de la Grande Jatte, a place popular with assorted social classes because of its accessibility, as well as Asnières, which was characterized by Parisian entertainers and lay opposite the working-class Clichy.<sup>19</sup> The artist developed a system of visual symbols to represent his observations of complex contemporary social segmentation. Thomson argues that including a mixed class of Parisians on canvas was a typical Parisian type of figure painting, and in studying the early drawings of Seurat, he points out that similar portraits also appear in *Types Français*, the caricature Honoré Daumier published with Charles Joseph Traviès in the early nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> However, Thomson also believes that despite art trends, Seurat sometimes deliberately depicted a juxtaposition of ambiguous

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<sup>17</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>. Eisenman, “Mass Culture,” 370–371.

<sup>20</sup>. Thomson, *Seurat*, 66.

social classes.<sup>21</sup> In 1882, his crayon drawing *Le Labourage* already depicted contrasts between the bourgeoisie and the working class: the worker works in the field while two bourgeois onlookers watch the landscape. Apparently, Seurat had formed the tendency to express his attitudes on social issues through juxtaposing the working and higher classes before painting *La Grande Jatte*. Thomson in particular has argued that Seurat's work shows his familiarity with the working conditions of his subjects.<sup>22</sup>

More importantly, the artist practiced drawing workers of the proletariat while forming his personal style. In *Le Labourage* (1882) (Fig.2) and *Le Marchand d'Oranges* (1881) (Fig.3), he depicted the loneliness and travail of these individuals' occupations. *Stone Breaker and Other Figures*, *Le Raincy* (1881) (Fig.5) is Seurat's study after Millet on motifs of rural workers. As well, Seurat frequently painted wet nurses, who were mocked as being "cows" by some commentators for their way of earning a living. Much earlier, before *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat had already depicted the clothing style of wet nurses in *Le Bonnet à Rubans* (1882) (Fig.4). Plentiful evidence in his early imagery shows Seurat's particular interest in the proletariat, which extended to his later years, as proved by the drawing *Le Balayeur* (1888) (Fig.6). Thomson has concluded that this evidence reveals the artist's conscious sympathy "without political<sup>23</sup> undertones."<sup>24</sup> However, while not political, such inclusion of the proletariat was a result of a democratic selection of painting motifs. In this way, Seurat painted a whole picture of contemporary Paris. He gave equal attention to various lifestyles instead of limiting himself to those with which he was familiar, unlike Monet, and he did not prefer to render the glamorous life of the bourgeoisie,

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<sup>21</sup>. Ibid., 73.

<sup>22</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>. "Political" refers to explicit political statements or actions.

<sup>24</sup>. Thomson, *Seurat*, 73.

as did Renoir. However, Seurat was a democrat rather than a Marxist. Although he focused on workers and the proletariat, his major subject was modern Parisian life, cosmopolitan scenes in which crowds comprising all social classes were necessary to make his paintings truthful.

His manifesto painting, *La Grande Jatte*, is a beautiful and complexly constructed work with significant critical value as regards social issues. First, it exemplifies how, as Félix Fénéon has stated, the Neoimpressionists “synthesize a landscape in a definitive aspect which perpetuates its sensation.”<sup>25</sup> Seurat intended to apply the Newtonian system advocated by Blanc and Chevreul,<sup>26</sup> whose progressive theories inspired him to create luminosity through mixed pigments according to Helmholtz’s conclusions on the retina’s sensitivity to primary light wavelengths.<sup>27</sup> By displaying local colors as complementary or contrasting, Seurat created luminosity using gray or white shades. Seurat had also studied the effects of cold and warm colors. In a letter he wrote in 1890, he analyzed the emotional effects of opposite tones: warm, luminous colors bring happiness, whereas dark and cold colors evoke sadness. *La Grande Jatte* is a painting of outdoor leisure, landscape, and modern spectatorship. From a technical angle, it was a successful result of Seurat’s color laboratory, which he described as follows: “Taking as given the phenomena of the duration of the impression of light on the retina. Synthesis follows as a result. The means of expression is the optical mixture of tones and of colors, that is to say, of light and their reactions according to the laws of contrast, the gradation of irradiation.”<sup>28</sup> In *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat divided the canvas into luminous areas and shadow; the great contrast created a quasiempirical

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<sup>25</sup> Félix Fénéon, “Neo-Impressionism (1887),” in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (California: University of California Press, 1994), 162.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Georges Seurat, “Letter to Maurice Beaubourg, August 28, 1890,” in *Nineteenth-Century Theory of Art*, ed. Joshua C. Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 541.

impression of a hot Sunday afternoon. Red, orange, and yellow hues dominate the canvas and create a delightful cheerfulness, balanced by black and gray shades. The luminosity of the lake and trees demonstrates the reflection of light. Unmixed dots of hues suspend the irradiation in the retina, where it is stored in memory as a photo. The dots serve not only as color but also as a symbol of Seurat's quest for objectivity, for "the creation of superior, sublimated reality."<sup>29</sup>

Seurat stated, "Art is harmony,"<sup>30</sup> and harmony for Seurat was based on sensual experiences and systematic ways of recreating impressions. Seurat admired Eugène Delacroix and successfully adopted his idea of achieving visual harmony through the arrangement of color. However, the harmonious form of *La Grande Jatte* is constituted not only by Seurat's creation of luminosity and careful arrangement of supplementary and contrasting colors but also by his application of techniques from ancient Greek art. In *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat applies the golden section, a classic geometric construction ratio that appears in the Egyptian pyramids, the Parthenon, and *The Last Supper*. The golden section refers to a design in which the ratio of a large segment to a small segment is the same as the ratio of the sum of both segments to the large segment. Moreover, in *La Grande Jatte*, the stasis of the characters is borrowed from the Parthenon processional frieze. Gustave Kahn recalled that Seurat had told him, "I want to make the moderns file past like figures on that frieze, in their essential form, to place them in compositions arranged harmoniously by virtue of the directions of colors and lines, line and color arranged in accordance with one another."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>. Roque, "Seurat and Color Theory," 48.

<sup>30</sup>. Eisenman, "Mass Culture," 375.

<sup>31</sup>. Ibid., 371–372.

It is important to state that although the concept of harmony was inherited from the European artistic tradition, the idea of presenting harmony through color was a courageous nineteenth-century innovation. Moreover, the theory of harmony through color was closely related to the thriving of music, which exclusively took place in nineteenth-century Europe. Mention of Eugène Delacroix is unavoidable, as his use of expressive brushstrokes and color profoundly influenced the Impressionists and Postimpressionists. As a close friend of Chopin, Delacroix declared, “He made me understand the meaning of harmony and counterpoint.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Delacroix saw the logic in music as equivalent to the truth philosophers found in science, stating, “The true science is not what we usually mean by that word—not, that is to say, a part of knowledge quite separate from art. No, science as regarded and demonstrated by a man like Chopin is art itself, but on the other hand, art is not what the vulgar believe it to be. It is pure reason, embellished by genius, but following a set course and bound by higher laws.”<sup>33</sup> Such an adoration for music and the concept of genius directly opposed the doctrines of academia. As an admirer of Delacroix, Seurat set his mind exquisitely between conservatism and progressivism, synthesizing the aesthetics of those different mindsets. The bourgeoisie were more inclined to traditional aesthetics and originally regarded sensual art—for example, artwork featuring color, impression, and sensation—as a challenge to the salon culture, as part of which decent patrons and academics appreciated classical historic motifs in art. Seurat, as the son of bourgeois parents and a *communard*, represented a hybrid of the bourgeois appreciation of high art and the middle and lower classes’ full reception of sensual experiences, as we see in his later artworks featuring mass entertainment.

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<sup>32</sup>. Eugène Delacroix, *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix* (London: Phaidon, 2006), 100.

<sup>33</sup>. Ibid.

*La Grande Jatte* also possibly served the moral function of taming behavior, as Blanc stated. Art historian T. J. Clark has identified the crowd on the bank to be a mixture of bourgeois, petit bourgeois, and working-class people and has further argued that it was a nineteenth-century trend for the petite bourgeoisie to imitate the leisure activities of the bourgeoisie.<sup>34</sup> However, without being accustomed to such leisure experiences and without resources to afford sports and parties, the petite bourgeoisie appeared to be idle, lazy, and immobile, without a clue of how to enjoy leisure. The bourgeoisie are present in the frieze as well, but only a little girl in a red hood is depicted as lively. This nearly invisible detail can be read to imply that adults, both bourgeois and petit bourgeois, were already in a stable but stiff life cycle, and neither they nor their lifestyles would change. As living figures with blurred faces, they are trivial, alike, standing not for themselves but for the social classes to which they belong. Their leisure activities were not inventive or individualistic, and they merely repeated the behavior patterns of their classes. Through Seurat's nearly invisible manipulation, the only hope for liveliness is assigned to the little girl.

Another obvious feature of *La Grande Jatte* is the absence of fathers, as we see only women with children on the canvas. Art historian S. Hollis Clayson has explained such a phenomenon by pointing out the historical fact that taking Sunday off was an emerging social convention in nineteenth-century French society,<sup>35</sup> and “the secret of working class morality [lay] in a Sunday

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<sup>34</sup>. S. Hollis Clayson, “The Family and the Father: The *Grande Jatte* and Its Absences,” in *Seurat Re-viewed*, ed. Paul Smith (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 69.

<sup>35</sup>. According to S. Hollis Clayson's essay “The Family and the Father: The *Grande Jatte* and Its Absences,” the working class in France used to take Monday off until 1884, when Seurat finished *Bathers at Asnières*. Workers used to prefer to spend Monday drinking and fraternizing with their male friends. However, in 1874, the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences promoted the ideas of Joseph Lefort, a Parisian lawyer who believed “the weekly day of rest could be used to revitalize family life.” Thus, working-class men were encouraged to take Sunday off and spend that time with their families. Aside from that, lower-class French men and women were fond of imitating the lifestyle of the bourgeoisie, which also emphasized Sunday as a day of rest over Monday.

day of rest.”<sup>36</sup> Though Sunday was expected to be a time for the lower class to showcase proper family behavior, Seurat’s canvas frankly depicts a scene in which women outnumber men. The women with children in *La Grande Jatte* are a mixture of mothers, wet nurses, and courtesans, whose occupations are indicated by their clothing style. Though women still assume the conventional responsibility of taking care of their children, men do not play fatherly roles in Seurat’s narrative. They are either in static solitude or are accompanied by courtesans with fashionable dress and accessories. *La Grande Jatte* is an obvious punch in the face to authorities such as the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, who expected those of the working class to show their morality through Sunday family behavior. Clayson has proposed a possible explanation that accompanying family on Sunday was seen as feminine behavior by the working-class man, who would rather have chosen to associate with other men or courtesans.<sup>37</sup>

As an artist educated on the morality of art, Seurat was possibly criticizing the wishful thinking of establishing a behavior model among the petite bourgeoisie or demonstrating the failure of the petite bourgeoisie to imitate the bourgeoisie in their leisure activities. It is also reasonable to assume Seurat was questioning the morality of men who, despite their social class, appeared to escape from their domestic roles. One thing of which we can be sure is that in *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat reveals the modern lives of the less privileged, these being women and the petite bourgeoisie, to be unpleasant. Art historian Linda Nochlin has argued that *La Grande Jatte* is an antiutopian allegory: “It should not be seen as merely passively reflecting the new urban realities of the 1880s but as actively producing cultural meanings through the invention of visual

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<sup>36</sup>. Clayson, “The Family and the Father,” 74.

<sup>37</sup>. Ibid., 75–76.



codes for a modern experience of the city.”<sup>38</sup> Through *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat allegorized antiutopianism. Nochlin has stated that Seurat was the only Postimpressionist to imbue his paintings with the modern condition and feature alienation, anomie, and spectacles, which were unprecedented sociocultural subjects.<sup>39</sup>

To discuss Seurat’s teleological purpose in art, it is necessary to examine his other paintings. The artist produced two paintings along with *La Grande Jatte*, *Bathers at Asnières* (1884) (Fig.7) and *Les Poseuses* (1884–1886) (Fig.8). Each painting depicts a single sex and can be interpreted as an extension of *La Grande Jatte*. *Bathers at Asnières* is believed to be a scene on the opposite bank of *La Grande Jatte*, and *Les Poseuses* depicts a backstage scene of models changing costume during their work. The three paintings together constitute an overview of male and female workers of the time. Men, as described by Clayson, take their rest on the shore near the factories, exhausted or idle. The functioning chimney in the background suggests that it is a Monday afternoon, since the policy of taking Sunday off was not strictly enforced throughout the upheavals in French politics at that time.<sup>40</sup> The boaters in the upper right corner are dressed in the bourgeois style: the man wears a top hat, and the woman holds an umbrella to block the sunlight. They can afford to hire a boatman, and it is strongly implied that the woman is a courtesan rather than the man’s wife because, for reasons of discretion, the two appear to be on a romantic date on the side of shore where workers are taking their day off.

*Les Poseuses* is unusual for Seurat in that it is the only work in which he provides a realistic frontal portrait of a character. The model is Madeleine Knobloch, a working-class woman and

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<sup>38</sup>. Linda Nochlin, “Seurat’s *Grande Jatte*, an Anti-Utopian Allegory,” in *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, ed. Mary Tompkins Lewis (California: University of California Press, 2007), 253.

<sup>39</sup>. *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>40</sup>. Clayson, “The Family and the Father,” 76.

Seurat's secret lover, with whom he had a son. Seurat creates a spot of light specifically for the model by casting a white towel at her feet, making her the center of the scene. Unlike in *Olympia*, by Manet, the nudity in *Les Poseuses* indicates nothing but the occupation of the women depicted. Seurat captures a scene of the models at ease. The woman on the left is changing, whereas the middle one, his lover, Madeleine, tilts her head to one side absentmindedly as though she has been standing too long to concentrate. The woman at the right sits with a slightly bent back, tired from working, and rests by retreating to her own world. Unconventionally, the models are depicted as normal people on a break from their jobs, not as nude women posing for the male gaze. Placing *La Grande Jatte* in the background further implies that *Les Poseuses* truthfully represents the process of making art, indicating that art is not a sublime creation but an artifact realized by its painter. The mise-en-scène reminds spectators of *The Painter's Studio: A real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life* (1854–1855), in which Courbet, the Realist master, sets himself alongside a little boy and a nude model who appears as a goddess from mythology.

The biggest difference between Seurat and Courbet is that Seurat completely erased himself from the setting and placed the female model at the center, while Courbet used the model as a symbolic muse of timeless beauty given form by the artist. In the painting, Courbet does not even look at the nude model but rather concentrates on his work. Through the arrangement in *Les Poseuses*, however, Seurat intentionally divested the painter of the allegorical status Courbet had assigned him through his manifesto work. Additionally, Seurat's realistic depiction of the nude female models as workers instead of as mere female bodies was quite a feministic move in the nineteenth-century Parisian cultural context. Nochlin has argued that Seurat played with the critical politics of representing the female body in *Les Poseuses*. Instead of following the

tradition of elevating nude characters as symbols of timeless beauty, Seurat strengthened their banality and their modernity by revealing their occupations as professional models.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, by displaying *La Grande Jatte* in the background as a painting decorating the wall, Seurat further suggested the nature of art as artifice, a modern departure through which art is made to strengthen its own material nature.

Another element of modernity exemplified by *Les Poseuses* is that Seurat consistently attempted to erase the presence of the painter throughout his career. Compared to Courbet, who was born and made famous in the early and middle nineteenth century, Seurat had less interest in glorifying the identity of the artist. Instead, he positioned himself more as a director or cameraman. Art historian Jonathan Crary agreed with this assessment in his analysis of the features of modern visual presentations of the nineteenth century by quoting Nietzsche: “No one is simply a painter anymore; they are also all archaeologists, psychologists, theatrical producers of this or that recollection or theory.”<sup>42</sup> Seurat’s canvas penetrates the spectators, whereas he was penetrated by the view he had painted. Using a method similar to camera obscura, by which spectators are hypnotized and lose their control of subjectivity, instead following the gaze of the characters on the canvas, Seurat weakened the dominance of the painter’s gaze and directed more attention to the gaze of the characters in his works, as though they were real humans worthy of notice and not mere ornaments of his composition. Thus, his work is more democratic than that of his contemporaries because he gave the autonomy of gazing to the characters he rendered on the canvas, and his spectators were not restrained to his subjectivity.

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<sup>41</sup>. Linda Nochlin, “Body Politics: Seurat’s *Poseuses*,” *Art in America* 82, no. 3 (1994): 72–75.

<sup>42</sup>. Jonathan Crary, quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, *Suspensions of Perception, Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 149.

To analyze Seurat's discourse of spectatorship, especially the spectatorship of the masses, the public, who had newly acquired the right to please themselves through consumption of entertainment, we must examine *Le Chahut* (1889–1890) (Fig.10), *Le Cirque* (1890–1891) (Fig.11), and *Parade de Cirque* (1887–1888) (Fig.12).

*Le Chahut* depicts a quadrille on a café's concert stage or possibly in a theatre. It is widely believed to have been inspired by cabaret posters, among which *Divan Japonais* (Fig.9), by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, is attributed as a preliminary study for *Le Chahut*.<sup>43</sup> The exaggerated lines and strong, bold palettes of *Divan Japonais* (1893) exhibit the certain influence of Japanese woodcut prints, which had a prevailing influence on French posters in the late nineteenth century. *Le Chahut* inherited the influence of abstract, elongated, linear figures and contrasting colors. Seurat enlarged the dancers' figures to amplify the facial expressions of the first two. To draw a comparison, Seurat placed the conductor, musician, and audience at the bottom of the painting and positioned the cellists across from the dancers, thereby elevating the dancers and musicians as symbols of a Wagnerian "higher life," a life of sublimity and perfection.

In reaction to this painting, symbolist critic Gustave Kahn argued that it was a "diagram of idea" led by a transcendent female dancer.<sup>44</sup> Critics have appraised the woman by drawing a contrast between her face and those of her male coworker and the audience:

The head of the female dancer [is] wonderfully beautiful by virtue of the contrast between its official, almost sacerdotal smile, and the tired delicacy of its features.... The male dancer is typically ugly.... He simply does a dirty job.... If you are looking at all costs for a symbol,

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<sup>43</sup>. Robert L. Herbert, *Seurat: Drawing and Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 162.

<sup>44</sup>. Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 130.

you will yet find it in the opposition between the beauty of the dancer, the modest riches of fairyland, and the ugliness of her admirer.<sup>45</sup>

*Le Cirque* is an allegorical work depicting a general circus of Seurat's time. The audience is segmented according to their social classes: working-class men wearing flat hats stand at the periphery of the auditorium, while bourgeois families wearing fashionable clothes sit at the front. However, corresponding to the scene in *La Grande Jatte*, the families lack either a father or a mother, a possible reflection of the trend of divorce, which started when the divorce law was reestablished in 1884.<sup>46</sup> The audience, despite their social classes, genders, and ages, all wear uniform masklike smiles. This exaggerates their excitement at seeing the spectacle but also may suggest the superficiality of their fashionable joy. In contrast, the female performer's face is emotionless as though she is untouched by the intense danger in the performance and the furious atmosphere in the circus tent; she seems like an automaton, an object deprived of all emotion. The horse and the female trouper are rendered into sanctity by their light, glorious shades of white and glimmering yellow. However, some of the male audience members are explicitly depicted as unleashing their beastliness and hypocrisy. For example, the man whose face is just beside the female trouper's clearly has a monkey's head. The one with the top hat, sitting near the entrance of the front row, whose face is disguised by a beard and mustache, is rendered as wearing a mask to cover his real expression. Art historian Paul Smith has argued that *Le Cirque* depicts a scene in a poem by Maurice Vaucaire in which the public is besotted with a nice girl and led by clowns to believe they are not men at all: "These women, these horses and these clowns—a fairyland, with a smell of the stable."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>. Ibid., 131.

<sup>46</sup>. Clayson, "The Family and the Father," 75.

<sup>47</sup>. Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 136.

*Parade de Cirque* (1887–1888) was Seurat’s first nocturnal painting and his first depiction of popular entertainment. The nighttime scene shows the entrance of the Circus Corvi, a traveling circus Fernand Corvi set up in a working-class district of Paris near the Place de la Nation.<sup>48</sup> Sideshows were held on the street as free spectacles to entice passersby to purchase tickets. In the image, on a temporary stage facing the audience, an androgynous trombone player stands along with a ringmaster and musicians playing to a crowd under the misty illumination of artificial gaslights. On the right side, the attracted spectators line up to buy tickets on the stairs.

Music in the nineteenth century was viewed as an approach to higher life, and enjoying music was another major leisure activity for those of assorted social classes. In *Parade de Cirque*, Seurat painted an audience of mixed classes: the working-class or petit bourgeois man in the bowler hat concentrates on the music, while the bourgeois men in cutaways and top hats whisper to each other. Crary has agreed with film historian Tom Gunning that *Parade de Cirque* is a representation of “the counter-traditional magical display and behind-the-scenes manipulation of optical appearances.”<sup>49</sup> He believes that by abolishing perspective and presenting multiple hidden gazes, the painting abandons traditional fixed subjectivity. As such, *Parade de Cirque* becomes a psychological portrait of how Seurat’s contemporaries devoted themselves to the musical experience. It reveals the assorted feelings and inner worlds of the spectators while demonstrating a social hierarchy among the audience: the bourgeois men distract themselves while the working-class man concentrates, devoted, on the sublime world of music.

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<sup>48</sup>. “Circus Sideshow (Parade de cirque),” Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437654>.

<sup>49</sup>. Jonathan Crary, “Illumination of Disenchantment: Seurat’s *Parade de Cirque*,” in *Seurat Re-viewed*, ed. Paul Smith (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 86.

Another groundbreaking aspect of *Parade de Cirque* is that it directly discusses the commercialization of art. The mise-en-scène might call to mind the ancient phrase “bread and circuses,” used by Roman writers to criticize the Roman Empire for keeping the populace distracted by distributing free food and organizing gladiatorial events. *Parade de Cirque* reveals the nature of popular entertainment as a commercialized version of bread and circuses driven by capitalism. It is not an ideal image of the audience enjoying the Wagnerian higher life but rather a depiction of how music was used as a promotional tool to stimulate further consumption of entertainment, demonstrated by the billboard behind the trombone player displaying numbers, the prices for entrance to the real show. Additionally, in *Parade de Cirque*, Seurat associates the lower middle class with the merit of respecting music but also alludes to the growing commercialization of art in the late nineteenth century. For example, the audience members show by their poses the serenity and sincerity that make them connect with the music, as the man in the bowler hat seems to be the only one actually enjoying the performance.

*Parade de Cirque*, *Le Cirque*, and *Le Chahut* can all be interpreted from two critical points of view: they demonstrate the consumption of mass entertainment, of spectacles, but they also reveal the working conditions of entertainers, especially female entertainers. Seurat took a sympathetic view of female laborers, preserving their beauty while rendering men more unpleasantly. In *Le Cirque* and *Le Chahut*, the women are transcendent. Although in their working costumes, they still look elegant and cheerful. In *Parade de Cirque*, the female trombone player is mystical, as though in a premodern ritual, with her aura still lingering in the very commercialized nineteenth-century arena of bread and circuses. In Seurat’s selection of motifs and in his ideology, he was avant-garde, and he focused considerably on the proletariat, the petite bourgeoisie, and women—those belonging to less privileged social classes whom the

bourgeoisie could exploit, disdain, or ignore. Seurat's depictions of his subjects' lives and working conditions suggest that as much attention should be given to them as to the aspiring bourgeoisie often rendered by the Impressionists, and he took a strictly different attitude on such subjects. While Degas was excellent at painting the beauty of ballerinas, he often rendered them as objects for the male gaze. Seurat looked at women with more equality, treating them as individuals who had their own occupations and life events that could even be performed without the presence of men.

In his technical methods, Seurat used artisanship to actualize the ideology of mechanical reproduction, but in fact he challenged such methods. His art appears to be an objective reflection of his contemporaries but indeed blends subtle irony and conscious sympathy. Neoimpressionism, led by Seurat, was the first art school intended to recreate impressions using a systematic and divisible, and thus adaptable, method. It was a very early attempt to "pixelate" and deconstruct an image while preserving all the classical merits of painting. Art historian Meyer Schapiro has argued that Seurat's dots are "a means of creating a special kind of order."<sup>50</sup> Though the dots appear mechanical, they are the "laborious work" of a "fanatical painter."<sup>51</sup> Schapiro has also suggested that Seurat's art focuses on virtuosity, since it was executed with certitude and rightness. In fact, it is possible that Seurat drew his inspiration from early monochrome photography. For example, Seurat's works have a quality similar to that of *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826) (Fig.13), the world's earliest surviving camera photograph, created by French photographer Nicéphore Niépce in 1826. Scholar Norma Broude has suggested that chromotypogravure, an early photomechanical color printing method that briefly

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<sup>50</sup> Schapiro, *Modern Art*, 142.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



prevailed in the 1880s, is “of particular relevance” in identifying the parallel between Seurat’s dots and early photographic printing techniques. By proposing *L’Hiver* (1884) (Fig.14) by Victor Gilbert as an example, Broude has compared the chromatic modeling, the expertly manipulated transition of shades, of Seurat’s Conté crayon works and his contemporary chromotypogravure productions and has argued that the dots were a vehicle that enabled him to “record the most minute alterations and transitions in color and tone from point to point across canvas.”<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, some art historians believe Seurat borrowed the style from Renaissance mosaics.<sup>53</sup> Despite the dispute, it is obvious that Seurat tried to break down the retinal experience into small molecules and reorganize it.

Seurat’s art is definitely unnatural, but it reveals the nature of painting. It is compelling to associate his innovations with the persistent advocacy of rationality, physics, and science taking place in Europe at the time, which had been initiated by Kant in the eighteenth century. The dots themselves also deconstruct Seurat’s paintings, as although Seurat applied scenography and chiaroscuro as classic methods to create a verisimilar effect, the visibility of the dots reminds the spectators of the paintings’ artificiality. On the other hand, this method reflects a resolution of autonomy—the autonomy of a mature human independent enough to approach and reconstruct the world using critical thinking. This reflection of autonomy was Seurat’s criticism of the Impressionists’ approach, but he persisted in working on sensual cognition, as the Impressionists had done. Seurat’s method was intended to increase the luminosity of local colors to achieve an optical mix in the retina, thus lengthening perception time. He claimed, “The retina’s retention of

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<sup>52</sup>. Norma Broude, “New Light on Seurat’s ‘Dot’: Its Relation to Photo-Mechanical Color Printing in France in the 1880s,” *The Art Bulletin* 56, no. 4 (1974): 581.

<sup>53</sup>. H. H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *History of Modern Art* (New York: Pearson Education, 2012), 43.

a luminous impression over a certain length of time results in a synthesis [of color stimuli].”<sup>54</sup> Contrary to the Impressionists’ immediacy, Seurat was focused on retention of perception. Moreover, he dissolved lines in his paintings and replaced them with directions created by contrasting colors, as he believed calmness, composed using warm and cold hues of equal dark and light, could be depicted horizontally, whereas sadness, composed using cool hues dominated by dark values, could be depicted with downward strokes.<sup>55</sup> Combined with his caricatured print-like renditions of silhouette and volume, such an attempt to simplify, systemize, and abstract compositions shared similarities with popular Japanese prints composed by abstract lines and strong color contrasts, which were regarded as a stunning, important inspiration for Western art’s departure toward modernity. Art historian Henri Dorra stated, “It is the elegant undulations of Japanese design that affected the linear patterns of the principal Neoimpressionist.”<sup>56</sup> Aside from that, Seurat absorbed his style from other “new things,” such as commercial posters, photography, and the popularity of music in the nineteenth century. He emphasized more on his method than associating himself with the identity of a master of painting. Seurat’s most democratic aspect was his intention to replace his own absolute subjectivity and genius with a traceable and learnable system of procedures. He no longer pursued the irreplaceable status of art master, nor did he advocate for high art or for the social class who had the privilege of appreciating it. Instead, he dissolved his gaze, his creativity, and his artistry into a machine method which, along with the age of mass production in the late nineteenth century, made individuals more and more trivial.

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<sup>54</sup>. Seurat, “Letter to Maurice Beaubourg,” 165.

<sup>55</sup>. Seurat, “Letter to Maurice Beaubourg,” 165.

<sup>56</sup>. Henri Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology* (California: University of California Press, 1994), 159.

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