

Georges Seurat
(Pronounced Zjorz Suh RAH)
1859-1891

Georges Seurat devoted most of his artistic energy to seven very large, monumental paintings. One of his most famous oil paintings, hanging in The Art Institute of Chicago, is entitled *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte*. This painting measures a little over six feet nine inches in height and it is ten feet in length. The painting shows us many people strolling through a park, lounging on the grass, and watching the sailboats and rowboats on the water. Seurat painted this picture only after he had done many studies and sketches for it. One of these drawings, *Tree on the Bank of the Seine*, created in conte crayon, also hangs in The Art Institute of Chicago. This simple drawing shows us how carefully Seurat studied the tree forms he wanted to include in his *La Grande Jatte* painting. The trees almost look bare in this preliminary study, but Seurat was aware of the figures he would place in *La Grande Jatte*.

This masterpiece took two years for Seurat to paint and the *Island of La Grand Jatte* became the setting for several of his paintings. In addition to his masterpiece, *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat is perhaps most famous for his innovative painting procedures, in which he used tiny brushstrokes of contrasting color to portray the play of light. Seurat called his procedure "Divisionism," but the method is more frequently known as "Pointillism." The many tiny spots of color dotting his canvas gave his paintings a shimmering effect.

Georges Seurat was born in Paris on December 2, 1859, to Ernestine Faivre and Antoine-Christostome Seurat, a property owner. Georges spent most of his childhood in Paris living with his mother, his brother Emile, and his sister Marie-Berthe. When Georges was in school, he began to draw and when he was sixteen years old, he took a course from a sculptor. He later studied painting at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. His teacher there was Henri Lehmann, a disciple of Ingres, who was a great portraitist. Georges became fascinated with the relationship between lines and images and their aesthetic (or beautiful) appeal.

In 1879, after a year of military service in Brest, Seurat returned to Paris and shared a studio with another painter, Edmond-Francois Aman-Jean, who also studied with Henri Lehmann, in 1883. Seurat displayed portraits of his mother and his friend Aman-Jean at the official Salon, an annual state-sponsored exhibit of artists' works. In the same year, Seurat began working on his first large-scale painting, *Une Baignade, Asnieres*, and exhibited this painting in 1884, with the Society des Artistes Independents. When Seurat exhibited *La Grande Jatte* at an Impressionist Group Show in 1886, his technique using Pointillism generated a lot of enthusiasm and interest. Two of Seurat's disciples, his artistic followers or pupils, were Camilla Pissarro and Paul Signac, artists who became famous in their own right, and who were also interested in the effects of light on color.

Seurat's final composition on a large scale like *Baignade* and *La Grande Jatte* was *Les Poseuses*. After *Les Poseuses* was completed in 1888, Seurat painted a number of landscapes and portraits, and he continued to show his work in various exhibitions in Paris and Brussels.

In February of 1890, a son was born to Seurat and Madeleine Knobloch, the woman with whom Seurat lived. While organizing an exhibition of paintings at the eighth Salon des Independents, where he showed what was to be his last painting, *Le Cirque (The Circus)*, Seurat became exhausted. He caught a chill and developed infectious angina. Seurat died on March 29, 1891, on Easter Sunday, before the exhibition ended. Seurat's year-old son contracted his father's illness and died a few weeks after his father's death.

Though Georges Seurat's artistic career was relatively brief, his work and the theories behind his work show us that he was one of the foremost painters in one of the greatest periods in the history of art. He took brilliant colors and effects of sunlight, two important characteristics of Impressionism, one step further. He created Pointillism by covering his canvas with a mass of colorful dots that seemed to make his paintings flicker with beautiful light and dreamlike haziness.

Seurat Framed Prints: *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* and *The Circus*

Possible Discussion Questions

- Discuss texture and how an artist can achieve a 3-D quality by using texture. Ask the students to tell you words that describe texture. (Smooth, rough, sticky, bumpy, lumpy, coarse, glossy, gritty, etc.)
- You might wish to look at things in the classroom and describe the texture and how you might paint that texture.
- Discuss the various tools an artist might use to show texture. (Brushes, palette knife, crayons, combs, cloth, etc.)
- Explain how Seurat painted these pictures by using "dots" of color to create the scene. Show a Sunday color comic strip and discuss that the image is "dots" of color, not solid colors! Discuss that a TV picture is actually a signal of many small dots of color or shades of black and white.
- Talk about things we investigate (as Seurat prepared to paint), and the difference between sparse and crowded, as illustrated in these works.

Vocabulary

Pointillism: A style of painting and drawing invented by Georges Seurat where dots of color are put on the art's work surface, and when viewed from a distance blend into each other.

Image: A replica or copy of a person, place, or thing.

Investigate: To research, to study.

Illustrate: To draw a picture that shows something, or tells a story.

Sparse: Not crowded or dense. Not touching.

Line: A long mark made by a drawing tool; a boundary.

Texture: The look and feel of something, especially its roughness or smoothness.