

SEURAT

Master of pointillism

GEORGES SEURAT (1859-1891)

In the eighteen eighties, Georges Seurat stuns the art world with his paintings composed of countless dotted – pointillist – brushstrokes. During his short career, he dies at the early age of thirty-one, Seurat paints some fifty works in this new style, dubbed neo-impressionism by writer and critic Félix Fénéon, which quickly spreads among a group of young artists.

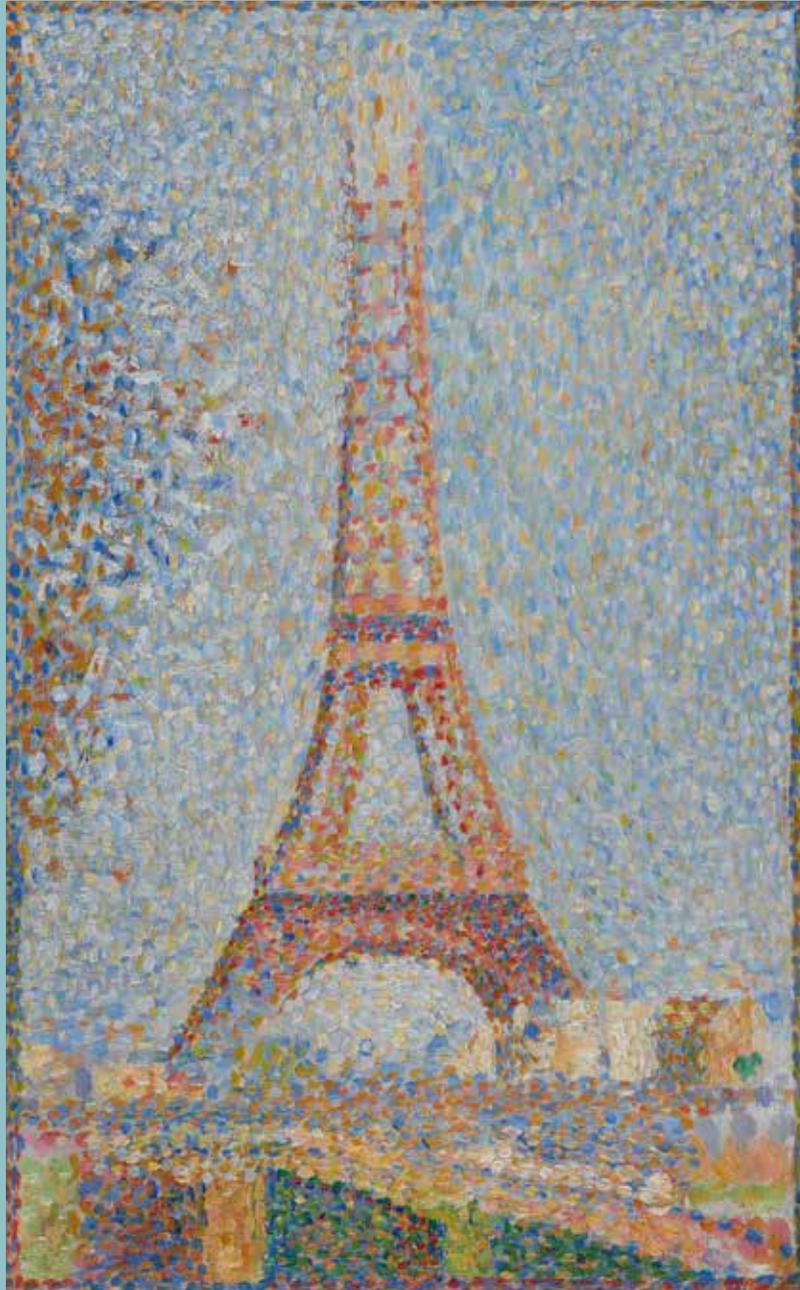
Seurat develops his revolutionary pointillist technique based on the latest scientific theories in the field of colour and light. His paintings are composed of a combination of miniscule dots and stripes in complementary colour contrasts. The unmixed touches of paint blend together in the eye of the observer and create a vibrating effect of shimmering light.

Seurat is the right person at the right time. Many of his contemporaries are tired of impressionism, with its fleeting depiction of reality based purely on visual perception. There is a growing demand for more depth and a more grounded basis for painting.

Seurat offers the perfect solution. He replaces the quick brushstroke of the impressionists with the deliberate dot and the hasty practice of working en plein air with the concentrated, time-consuming studio work.

Seurat shares his love of light with the impressionists and his subjects are also in keeping with his predecessors. Like them, he selects themes from modern life in Paris and its surroundings. His seascapes, the majority of his painted oeuvre, have long been a favourite theme in painting. But unlike the impressionists, Seurat strives to depict the world around him reduced to its essence with his new painting method. In that respect, he finds his young contemporaries from symbolist circles on his side. They also seek a new style with which to capture the timeless essence of reality. Instead of depicting the visible world as accurately as possible, they attempt to discern the world of ideas that lies behind it.

Georges Seurat, *La tour Eiffel*, 1889, oil on panel, 24,1 x 15,2 cm, Museum purchase, William H. Noble Bequest Fund. 1979.48, de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA



Neo-impressionists and symbolists form a lively network in Seurat's day. They have frequent discussions in cafes, living room meetings and in the editorial offices of symbolist magazines, in which Seurat's work is regularly reviewed. The critic, poet and theorist of the symbolist movement Gustave Kahn (1859-1936) sums up the aspiration of both avant-garde movements as 'the full presentation of a truth, disengaged as much as possible from attendant circumstances'. A close relationship develops between the leading light of French literary symbolism and Seurat. His texts, therefore, are an abundant source for Seurat's work.

Through loans from museums and private collectors from all over the world, the Kröller-Müller Museum has brought together twenty-three of Seurat's paintings and twenty-four of his drawings. It is the first time that so many of his painted and drawn works are being exhibited in the Netherlands.



Georges Seurat, undated, photographer unknown

Georges Seurat (1859 - 1891)

'Brown hair, brown eyes, average forehead, prominent nose, average mouth, round chin, oval face, 5 feet 10½ inch, no distinguishing mark', reads the description of Seurat in his military papers. His friends describe him as a complicated personality and a man of stature. On public occasions he wears a black suit and top hat. His colleague Edgar Degas calls him 'the notary' for that reason. But Kahn describes how Seurat, after working hard all morning, partakes of a quick lunch at an arbitrary local restaurant: 'on his head would be a soft felt hat with a very narrow brim and crushed down at the neck. He would wear a short jacket and look as unaffected as he could be'. Seurat is reserved and taciturn. While he fiercely defends his position as the father of neo-impressionism if necessary, he reveals very little about his work. This silence regarding his intentions, combined with his untimely death, has certainly contributed to the intangible and sometimes enigmatic character of his works.



Georges Seurat, *Maison sur une colline*, ca. 1883, black crayon and conté crayon on paper, 24,5 x 31,8 cm, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

The world in black-and-white

Prior to making his breakthrough as a painter in 1884, Seurat develops an entirely individual style of drawing. In the course of his short career he makes a total of about two hundred drawings, almost exclusively in conté crayon on white paper with a granular texture. With these materials he creates light and dark sections with gradual transitions and no contour lines. By alternating the pressure applied to the waxy crayon on the granular paper, areas remain uncovered across the entire sheet. Consequently the white base layer plays an important role in creating light-dark transitions and depth. Gustave Kahn hails Seurat as the finest draughtsman that he knows. In his view, neo-impressionism itself began with Seurat's early drawings. Seurat does not seek to capture the fleeting moment, like the impressionists, but to grasp a subject in its most fundamental form. By stylizing shapes into volumes composed of tones and contrasts, he fathoms the most characteristic features of his subjects, as if painting in black and white. Moreover, his drawings provide material for the rest of his oeuvre. Even after his breakthrough as a painter, Seurat continues making many drawings and exhibits these alongside his paintings.

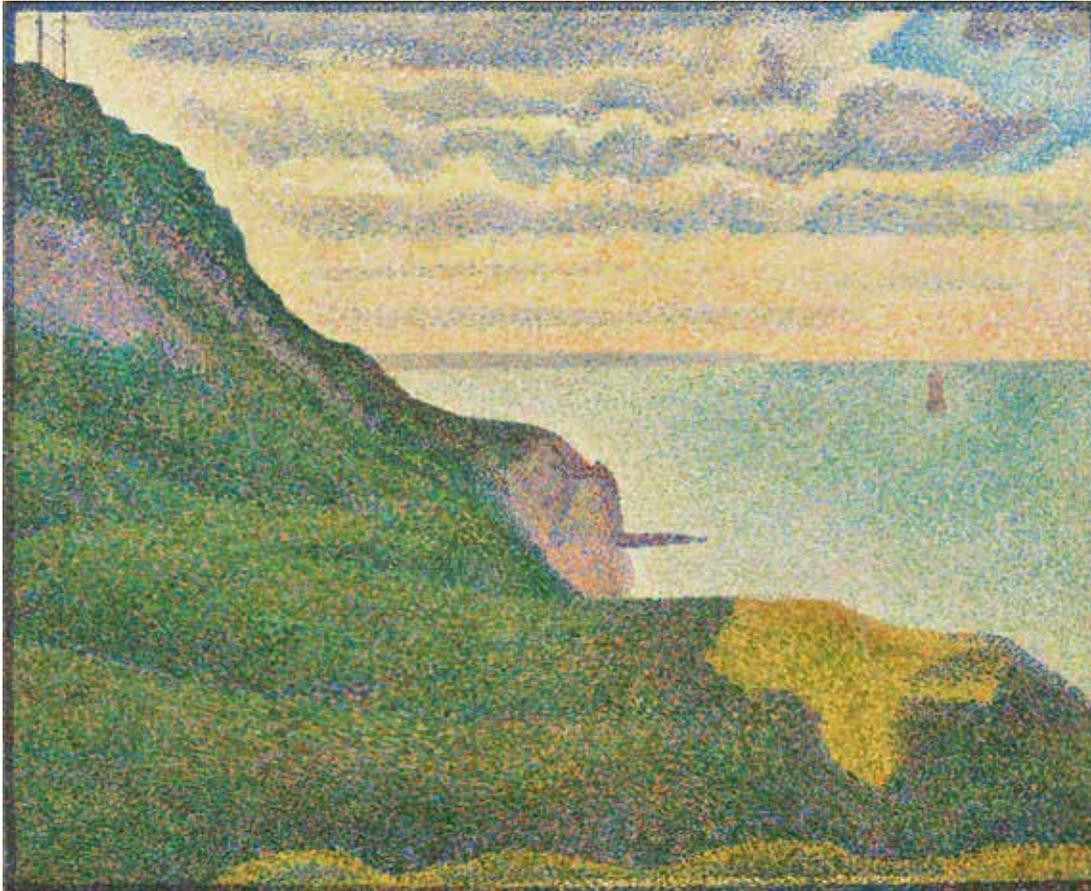


Georges Seurat, *Femme au manchon*, ca. 1884, conté crayon on paper, 30 x 23 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Parisian themes

For his earliest drawings, from between 1881 and 1884, Seurat finds his themes in Paris and its suburbs. These are most likely drawn en plein air and frequently at dusk. Dark silhouettes of houses in the expanding outskirts of the city, poplars along the Seine and signs of the emerging industrialization, such as electricity poles along a railway line, or a steamboat on the river. Seurat also draws numerous figures, some apparently unoccupied and others in their daily routine, such as labourers at work, a woman walking her dog, a street musician or a lady parading in the latest fashion.

Seurat generally isolates these subjects from their surroundings. He omits details of the facial features and clothes and other elements that are deemed unessential. In this way, Seurat elevates these everyday scenes above the gross. It is for good reason that he often works in the dim twilight, when details of the surroundings are poorly visibly and sharp definitions disappear. By already liberating himself from line and colour in his drawings, Seurat is ultimately able to develop his pointillist painting technique.



Georges Seurat, *Les falaises à Port-en-Bessin*, 1888, oil on canvas, 65,1 x 80,9 cm, gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

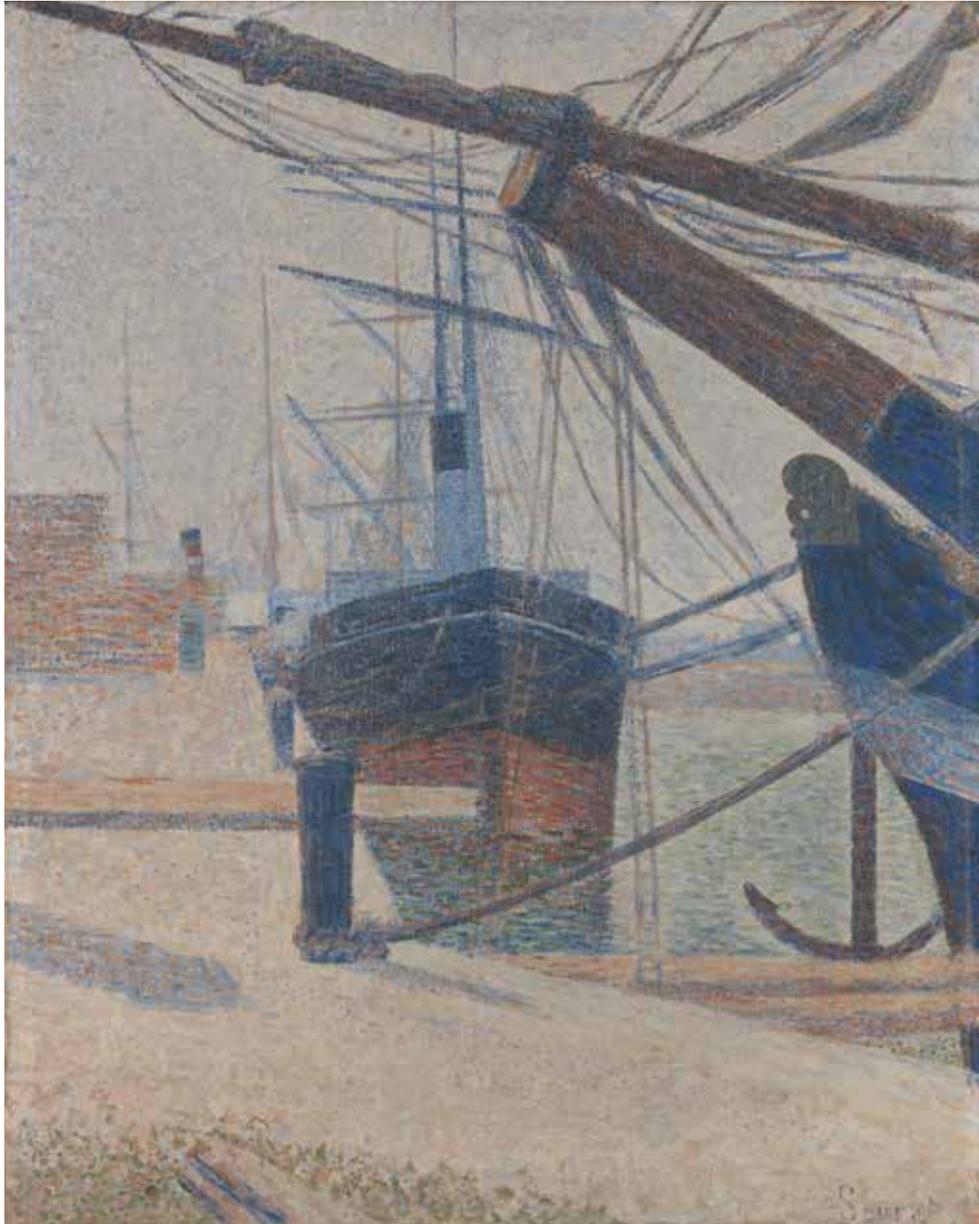
Seascapes and harbour views

From 1885 to 1890, Seurat spends the summer months on the coast of Normandy and Pas de Calais. Only in 1887 does he remain in the city. In contrast to his friend and colleague Paul Signac, who prefers the glaring sunlight of the Côte d'Azur, Seurat feels drawn to the pale, grey light of the northern sea. It inspires him to make twenty-four seascapes and harbour views.

These are enthusiastically received by the art critics. Shortly after his death, symbolist poet Émile Verhaeren goes as far as to say that Seurat's greatest contribution to contemporary art is in his seascapes and landscapes.

In Seurat's day, the coast of Northern France is developing into a popular tourist destination, thanks to the construction of the railway network and increasing prosperity. Hotels and guesthouses are being built at a rapid pace. But there is no sign of this in Seurat's tranquil paintings, virtually all of which are devoid of human activity. Even the elements seem absent. Seurat's coasts and harbours contain no capricious interplay of wind and water, of sun and shadow. The sky is usually just as motionless as the sea and the fine pointillism shrouds the paintings in a diffuse, even light.

Seurat encapsulates the changeable coastal landscape in this form. He is not in search of that one, fleeting moment that never returns, but instead he creates a timeless image.



Georges Seurat, *Coin d'un bassin à Honfleur*, 1886
oil on canvas, 79,5 x 63 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Honfleur

In the summer of 1886 Seurat stays in Honfleur, a seaport town popular among artists, on the southern edge of the Seine estuary. There he works on six paintings simultaneously. A great deal is known about the origins of these, thanks to a correspondence with Paul Signac and various studies in crayon and oils.

The most typical feature is that Seurat's chosen subjects are not the picturesque old port and medieval town centre, but a deserted rock, ships moored in the industrial port and an isolated hospice and lighthouse. These places are situated less than fifteen minutes walking distance from his operating base, a room that he rents from a customs officer. Everything is initially set down en plein air in crayon drawings or sketches in oils. In the oil sketches, Seurat indicates the colours he has in mind with rough dots and smudges.

On his return to Paris after two months the works are in various stages of completion. With the crayon drawings and oil sketches as a guide, he develops them further in his studio. In the final stage, he applies the stippling on top of the dry base layers.

Coin d'un bassin à Honfleur remains unfinished. Seurat works on it for eight days, but then the black ship puts to sea. The painting's surface is made up of broad and long brushstrokes in different directions and thus shows the phase in the painting process before the dots are applied.

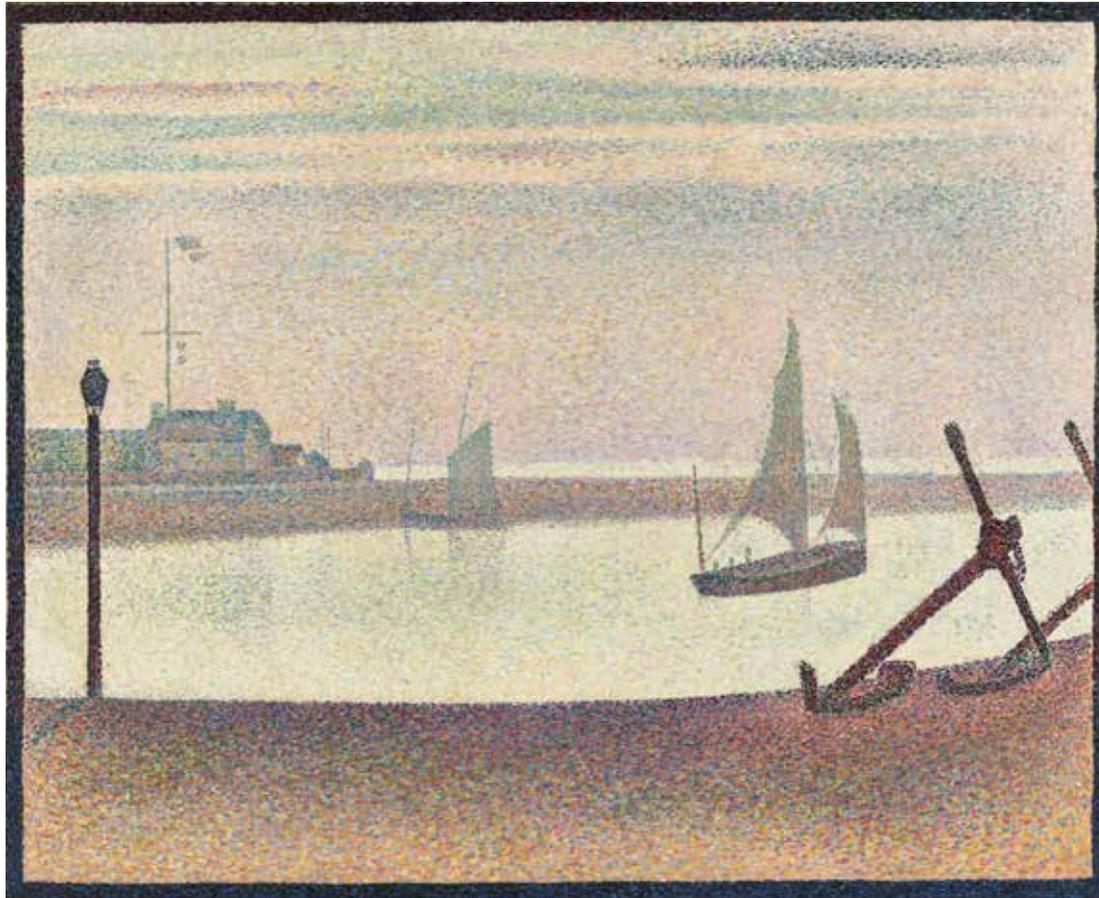


Georges Seurat, *Port-en-Bessin, le pont et les quais*, 1888, oil on canvas, 66 x 83,2 cm, The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN

Port-en-Bessin

In 1888 Seurat makes a series of six harbour views in Port-en-Bessin, a fishing village on the Normandy coast near Bayeux, 'discovered' by Paul Signac. There are no known sketches or drawings for the paintings. Seurat appears to paint the composition directly onto the canvas. As in Honfleur he ignores the local attractions, such as Roman ruins, a church and an old bridge, and chooses the more prosaic harbour. Whether deliberately or not, the series of paintings portray the harbour basin and the surrounding rocks from all sides. Seurat also works at different times of the day and at low and high tide. The central pier and fish market is a recurring element.

Although these scenes again display little activity, Seurat does experiment with figures in the composition, as in *Port-en-Bessin, le pont et les quais*. These, however, are not people of flesh and blood, but stiff little dolls, tightly arranged in the landscape. The art critic Félix Fénéon, too, feels that the figures lack humanity and finds them above all too unoriginal: Seurat copies them from his figure studies. In *Port-en-Bessin, un dimanche*, the tiny figures against the harbour wall are almost completely reduced to vertical elements in the powerful geometric structure of the composition. With its bright colours and fluttering flags, the overall atmosphere of the painting is unusually cheerful for Seurat's landscapes. The painting is probably one of the last in the series, in view of the fine pointillism.



Georges Seurat, *Le chenal de Gravelines, un soir*, 1890, oil on canvas, 65,2 x 81,7 cm, gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A.M. Burden, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY © 2014. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

Gravelines

In 1890 Seurat spends the summer, his final summer, in Gravelines, just south of Dunkirk. He selects the spot where the canalized River Aa flows into the sea, flanked by two forts, Grand-Fort-Philippe and Petit-Fort-Philippe. The four paintings created here are preceded by four studies in oils and eight drawings of boats, anchors, masts and the coastline. Seurat employs a fine, uniform stippling in all four works. Smaller dots are often applied in the middle of larger ones, a method he starts using in 1886 and which enables him to apply highly sophisticated contrasts and accents. The result is a pale and diffuse light, characteristic of places where light and water meet.

Although only the title of *Le chenal de Gravelines, un soir* refers to a specific time of day, given the changing colour of the light it is reasonable to assume that Seurat shows the harbour at different moments of the day.

Around the boats in the harbour basin, which are used to fish for herring and cod, there is absolutely no sign of any activity. The inward bound boat in *Gravelines: direction de la mer* even lacks a skipper. This total desolation in scenes of human activity lends a puzzling aspect to this series of paintings. Through the omission of incidental circumstances and with his refined technique, Seurat manages to create a timeless and serene atmosphere in his Gravelines series.

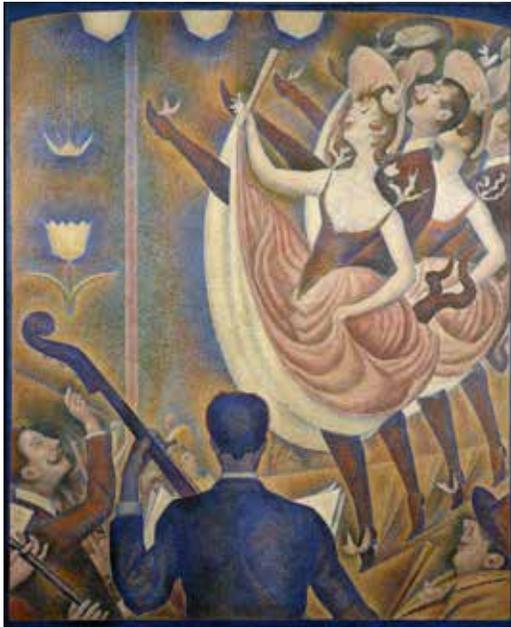


Georges Seurat, *Studie voor Parade de cirque*, 1887-1888, oil on canvas, 16 x 26 cm,
Stiftung Sammlung E.G. Bührle, Zürich

Figure pieces

In addition to the seascapes and harbour views, which make up the majority of his painted oeuvre, Seurat also paints six canvases in which the human figure plays a leading role. Two of these show Parisians in their free time, one depicts three nudes and three have the Paris entertainment industry as their theme. This is a booming industry in Seurat's day, with circuses, cabarets and café-concerts, where singers and other entertainers perform. Principally the unrefined establishments on the outskirts of the city, such as Montmartre, become popular meeting places and sources of inspiration for artists and writers. As of 1886 Seurat, who already displays an interest in evening scenes in his early drawings, devotes the majority of his work in Paris to the dusky places of entertainment, often illuminated by gaslight.

Parade de cirque, which he exhibits at the Salon des Indépendants in 1888, is his first large nocturnal scene with artificial lighting. The painting depicts a promotional act for the Paris Circus Corvi, which is performed in the street to entice passers-by into buying a ticket. In contrast to his seascapes, Seurat's figure pieces are roundly criticized. The pointillist technique is deemed too mechanical and unnatural for the depiction of people. Gustave Kahn, on the other hand, sees Seurat's stylized portrayal of figures and scenes as a high point in his endeavour to reduce an image to its essence using purely pictorial means.



Georges Seurat, *Le Chahut*, 1889-1890, oil on canvas, 170 x 141 cm, Kröller- Müller Museum, Otterlo



Georges Seurat, *Le Cirque*, 1890-1891, oil on canvas, 186 x 151,1 cm, an exceptional loan from the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski

Le Chahut and *Le Cirque*

Seurat's last two large figure pieces, *Le Chahut* and *Le Cirque*, are scenes of the popular entertainment. Chahut (rowdiness or uproar) is another name for cancan (gossip or scandal), a dance that came into vogue in the working-class districts of Paris around 1830 and that creates a scandal with its high kicks and leg waving. The lines and movement in the painting are directed upwards in order to evoke the exuberant atmosphere of the dance and music.

The colours are the warm purple and red of glowing gaslight, applied in a veil of fine dots. The dancers are depicted not as individuals, but as somewhat caricatured stereotypes. They move in a rhythmic repetition in which everything participates: the high-kicked legs, the pleats in the skirts, the fluttering fringes on the clothes and the stylized linear shadows under their feet.

In *Le Cirque*, apparently inspired by a circus performance at Cirque Fernando, the main figures form a continuous movement: from the clown in the foreground waving his yellow ribbon, via the group of men on the right and the tumbling acrobat, to the backwards-leaning acrobat and the galloping front legs of the horse. The grandstand with its schematic figures makes a more stiff and motionless impression. Besides the dominant white, the primary colours of red, yellow and blue maintain a mutual balance and the fine pointillism follows the rhythm of the lines.

Despite the suggestion of movement, both paintings have a stylized and reserved appearance. Seurat renders the wild dance and spectacular circus acts in rigid frameworks of dots, lines and colour combinations. These are not fleeting scenes of the Parisian nightlife, but scrupulously deliberated and directed paintings.

Seurat. Master of pointillism

Lenders

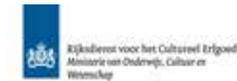
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