Sunday in the Park with George

music and lyrics by STEPHEN SONDHEIM
book by JAMES LAPINE
directed by JOSEPH HAJ
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The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. By presenting both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures, the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world.
Early on a Sunday morning in 1880s Paris on the island of La Grande Jatte, a young painter named George [Seurat] draws his mistress Dot. People enjoy their day off at the park, including painter Jules and his wife Yvonne, who have just seen George’s most recent painting on exhibit, and a Nurse and an Old Lady, George’s mother. Later that day at his studio, George works on his next painting while Dot prepares for the evening out that George promised her. When he gets absorbed in his painting and forgets, Dot storms out.

Another Sunday and George sketches while two young women named Celeste gossip about how Dot is now with Louis the baker. More visitors arrive, and new and ongoing romantic entanglements become clear. Dot arrives with Louis and works on reading lessons from a grammar book. Mr. and Mrs., an American couple, love Louis’ pastries but not much else about Paris. George meditates on having lost Dot because his art comes first. Dot returns to show George that she is pregnant with his child.

Later, at George’s studio, Dot asks for a painting George made of her and tells him she is marrying Louis. They’re interrupted by Jules and Yvonne. While Yvonne and Dot commiserate over being in a relationship with an artist, George explains to Jules his color theory and style of painting, hoping Jules can get the new painting seen. When they leave, Dot tells him she’s going to America with Louis, who has been hired by Mr. and Mrs.

Back on Grande Jatte, George tells his nostalgic mother that he makes things beautiful in his art. Dot arrives with her baby daughter, Marie, hoping to get the painting of her before they all leave for America. As more visitors arrive, tempers flare and they all descend into chaos, which George brings to order. He arranges them into a tableau of Seurat’s “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte.”

Having held these positions for a long time, the characters complain about being stuck in a painting for eternity. The action moves to the American museum...
where the Seurat painting hangs and where another artist named George is presenting his latest sculpture, Chromolume #7, with his grandmother, Marie, to honor the painting's 100th anniversary. During the reception, while George works the room, everyone talks about the hustle that is being an artist. Marie looks at the Seurat painting, finding her mother Dot’s image and telling George that their family, including his great-grandfather Seurat, and his art are both important.

George visits La Grande Jatte to present the Chromolume. Marie has passed away, and he is sad, restless and hoping to find something in the park that will confirm Marie's story about their family. In Marie’s grammar book, he finds notes Dot wrote long ago about the painter George. The island – and Dot – help him to recognize that there is still more he has to say as an artist.

1880s

George, Georges Seurat, an innovative painter
Dot, his mistress
Old Lady, George’s mother
Nurse, to the Old Lady
Jules, a famous painter
Yvonne, his wife
Louise, their daughter
Franz, a coachman working for Jules and Yvonne
Frieda, married to Franz, also works for Jules and Yvonne
Boatman
Celeste #1, a shopgirl
Celeste #2, a shopgirl
Louis, a baker
Soldier
The Soldier's Companion
Mr. and Mrs., an American couple visiting from Charleston

1980s

George, an innovative sculptor
Marie, his grandmother, Dot’s daughter
Elaine, George’s ex-wife
Dennis, an engineer working with George
Naomi Eisen, a composer working with George
Robert Greenberg, the museum’s director
Lee Randolph, the museum’s PR director
Harriet Pawling, a board member for the museum
Billy Webster, her friend
Charles Redmond, a museum director from Texas
Alex, an artist
Betty, an artist
Blair Daniels, an art critic
Waiter
Photographer

Setting

Island of La Grande Jatte and George’s Studio, Paris, 1880s. An American art museum then La Grande Jatte, 1980s.
Responses to the Play

The painting, Georges Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte*, depicted the French bourgeoisie passing a sunny day on a small island in the Seine, apparently doing not much of anything. Lapine and Sondheim had the intriguing notion of trying to answer two questions in their musical: Who were these people – what were their lives really about? And who was Georges Seurat that he felt so compelled to depict them in an apparently documentary fashion – an elaborate snapshot of a community in repose that presented many more questions than it answered? True, the actual subject was the artist’s insatiable need to create and connect. But there were lots of stories to tell along the way, and no one had done that in a narrative musical before.


As befits a show whose subject is the creation of a landmark in modernist painting – Georges Seurat’s *“Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte”* (1886) – “Sunday” is itself a modernist creation, perhaps the first truly modernist work of musical theater that Broadway has produced. Instead of mimicking reality through a conventional, naturalistic story, the authors of “Sunday” deploy music and language in nonlinear patterns that, like Seurat’s tiny brushstrokes, become meaningful only when refracted through a contemplative observer’s mind. ...

Theatergoers always know when they’re being addressed with burning passion: When “La Grande Jatte” snaps into its finished form on stage, the spectacle is more dramatic and emotionally transporting than any conventional story Sondheim has ever tried to tell.

Mr. Sondheim brought to fruition his view of a relationship, successful or not, was a giving of knowledge from one person to another [in *Sunday in the Park with George*], ... On the surface, Dot resembles the classic masochistic musical heroine. Her lover is temperamental and difficult; he supports her, employs her; he even controls her public image by painting her. And though the two love each other, the tenor of their life together is dictated entirely by George’s whims and his needs.

Dot has no expectation of ever finding anyone she loves as much as George, but she’s remarkably attuned to timing, and she carefully monitors the fragility of her own self respect. She knows when she has to move on, as she says. She tells George the words that no Oscar Hammerstein heroine could ever have uttered and actually meant: No one is you and / No one can be. / But no one is me, George, / No one is me. / We do not belong together.

The show’s second act leaps forward in time to find Seurat’s great grandson, also named George, stuck in a painful artist’s...
Feeling desperately alone, George wanders on the Parisian island where Seurat painted Dot a hundred years before. Dot appears to him there. After a momentary confusion, George understand that she wants to help him find wisdom and give him back something of what Seurat gave to her. George finally begins to absorb what Dot is telling him when she touches on what is by now a recurring theme in Sondheim, the exchange of love as a willing and magnanimous act. She sings:

Look at all the things you've done for me / Opened up my eyes, / Taught me how to see, / Notice every tree, / Understand the light ... / Let me give to you / Something in return / I would be so pleased ...


Despite the eccentricities I've alluded to in Lapine's book, it is a great one at least in part because it provided Sondheim with such magnificent carrion from which to concoct his feast of a score. But more than that, it helped Sondheim, after the disaster of *Merrily We Roll Along* in 1981 and the breakup of his long creative partnership with Hal Prince, to “move on” — just as Dot encourages George to do in the song of that name. (“Stop worrying if your vision is new. / Let others make that decision — they usually do.”) Having threatened to give up on musical theater to write murder mysteries or video games, he was instead reinvigorated by the downtown purity and formal daring of Lapine's writing, which released a different voice in him. The key thing about that voice is that it offers no excuse for itself: not for its intelligence, its faith in art, its bloodhounding for rapture. The result is Sondheim's most personal statement and thus, with all its odd corners and occasional wanderings, his most moving.

What it isn’t is topical, not in the way we use the word in the theater today. It has nothing to say about fascism, except perhaps as it applies to gallerists, salonistes, and critics. It does not weigh in on race or religion, though it touches on gender and class. (The boatman in the lower left of Seurat’s painting has some salty views on the subject.) So many great musicals take on such topics that it’s easy to think they are the only kind, besides flat-out comedies, worth treasuring; in Sondheim's own catalogue, *Sweeney Todd* plays as a cautionary tale of class injustice and *Assassins* always teeters on the verge of nightly news. But at a time when art and politics are merging, when the latter is so often trotted out as if it were a necessary excuse for the former, it may be useful, crucial even, to recall that some great artists have done everything in their considerable power to keep the two apart. Beauty can be a public virtue. When a character sings to his wife that “Work is what you do for others, Liebchen; art is what you do for yourself,” it gets a laugh of acknowledgment. But in *Sunday in the Park With George*, Sondheim and Lapine ask us to consider that the opposite may also be true.

Jesse Green, “Theater Review: Jake Gyllenhaal in *Sunday in the Park with George,*** Vulture.com, February 23, 2017

THE PLAY
Stephen Joshua Sondheim was born on March 22, 1930, in Manhattan to a wealthy Jewish family. His parents, Etta Janet “Foxy” and Herbert Sondheim, were distant parents and spent most of their time working in the fashion industry. In later years Sondheim described his childhood as one of an “institutionalized child, meaning one who has no contact with any sort of family.” His parents divorced when Sondheim was 10, and Foxy and Stephen moved to Pennsylvania, not far from a designer friend of Foxy – the wife of lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. Sondheim befriended the Hammersteins’ son James and spent more and more of his time away from his mother and with the Hammersteins. Estranged from both of his parents, Sondheim found a father figure in Hammerstein, who brought Sondheim with his family to see Broadway shows. Hammerstein became both teacher and inspiration.

In his teens, Sondheim wrote a musical called By George, proudly presented it to Hammerstein, and asked him to critique it as though Sondheim was another professional. Hammerstein bluntly told him it was terrible, then offered to help him understand why. “In that afternoon I learned more about songwriting and the musical theater than most people learn in a lifetime,” Sondheim said later. Another great influence on Sondheim was his first music teacher at Williams College, Robert Barrow, who taught Sondheim the logic behind music. Sondheim loved Barrow’s practical, dry approach to something he had once seen as “romantic.”

In 1957, Sondheim was asked to write the lyrics for a new musical re-working of Romeo and Juliet, which would become West Side Story. It was his artistic introduction to the Broadway stage. Sondheim worked alongside composer Leonard Bernstein to write the show’s lyrics despite their vastly different approaches. Sondheim later said that he regretted some of the more poetic and romantic lyrics in the show.

1962’s A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum was the first show for which Sondheim wrote both music and lyrics. The musical won many Tonys, including Best Musical, but Sondheim’s score was not well received. This has been a recurring theme for many of Sondheim’s musicals: he’s received consistent criticism that his lyrics are too dark, his tunes are not “hummable,” and the subject matter “wrong” for a musical. Sondheim’s response to those who think his work inaccessible is that “what I write has to be listened to more than once.” His shows would often flop after a short run with little profit gained, but receive critical acclaim much later. Sondheim’s many awards
(including an Academy Award, eight Grammys, eight Tonys and a Pulitzer Prize) are testament to that critical acclaim. His body of work includes Anyone Can Whistle (1964), Company (1970), Follies (1971), Sweeney Todd (1979), Merrily We Roll Along (1981), Sunday in the Park with George (1984), Into the Woods (1987), Passion (1994) and Road Show (2008; formerly titled Bounce).

Sondheim doesn’t write for the approval of his audience: “If they don’t like it because they don’t understand it, that’s bad. That is the writer’s fault. If you write it and it’s clear and they don’t like it, that’s not your fault. That’s what art is about.” His unconventionality greatly changed the face of American theater. He has stated that he did not set out to change the genre, but rather kept innovating because he didn’t want to get bored. “Does it ever occur to me that I am developing any new kind of musical? … Never!”

James Lapine was born on January 10, 1949, in Mansfield, Ohio, to Lillian and David Sanford Lapine. The Lapines lived in Mansfield until Lapine was in his teens, when the family moved to Stamford, Connecticut. Throughout college and graduate school, Lapine’s focus was not on theater – his undergraduate degree is in history and his M.F.A. in design. After finishing graduate school in California, Lapine moved to New York and began creating freelance design work for the Yale School of Drama. Impressed with Lapine’s work, Dean Robert Brustein asked him to design in a full-time capacity and gave him a part-time faculty position teaching advertisement design.

During the annual January term at YSD, in which faculty and students are encouraged to undertake a project in an area with which they are unfamiliar, Lapine’s students persuaded him to direct a show. Lapine chose an adaptation of Gertrude Stein’s Photograph, a three-page-long play that consists of five acts. The adaptation was well received and after it moved to a small, Off-Broadway performance space in SoHo, was positively reviewed by The New York Times and earned Lapine an Obie Award. Shortly afterwards, Lapine was asked to write a piece for the Music-Theatre Group which became Twelve Dreams, a work in progress based on a case history by Carl Jung.

In 1981, Stephen Sondheim saw Twelve Dreams and was inspired by it. A partnership between the two men was formed. Lapine’s directorial approach was always very visual due to his design background and tended towards the avant garde, which attracted Sondheim. Sondheim and Lapine created Sunday in the Park with George (1984), Into the Woods (1987) and Passion (1994) with Sondheim composing and writing lyrics and Lapine writing the books and directing each show. Lapine said of their partnership, “I’m sort of the go-getter. I’ll throw anything on a piece of paper … And [Sondheim]’s like … everything’s so meticulous. It’s hard for him to let go of things. We’re a good combo that way.” At the same time, Lapine has admitted to being the more artistically pessimistic of the two, fearing that everything will be a flop, whereas Sondheim always assumes that his shows will be successful.

After success on Broadway, winning a Pulitzer for Sunday in the Park with George and several Best Book and Best Director Tonys for George, Passion and Falsettos, Lapine tried his hand at film directing, with his first project being Impromptu (1991), the screenplay of which was written by his wife Sarah Kernochan. He went on to direct and write other film projects, including the 2014 screenplay for the movie adaptation of Into the Woods. He has also continued directing on Broadway, including the 2012 revival of Annie. In 2013, he directed an Emmy-nominated Stephen Sondheim documentary, Six By Sondheim, for HBO.

In an interesting full-circle development, Lapine’s niece Sarah Lapine is the director of the 2017 Broadway revival of Sunday in the Park with George.
In the Authors’ Words

There are certain images that always haunt me and that [the painting of “La Grande Jatte] was one of them. I remember when I saw the original, being mesmerized by it. …

We hit on the idea of theme and variations, as opposed to something that was rooted in a linear story. … I thought about the “Grande Jatte,” which was a painting Steve knew, and that was it. I just sat down and started writing the play. …

What happened was it became so rich. The more one looks at that painting, the more one discovers these things going on that initial investigation doesn’t reveal. It became apparent there was a lot to explore. Steve tends to wait for the book before writing his material. He thinks a great deal about what he’s going to do, and he was exploring the musical structure he was going to base the score on. But he worked along with me the whole time.

I’d bring in six or seven pages, and we’d talk about it and see where it went, and it became clear it would be more interesting and challenging to do not a theme and variations but something that grew a little more linear, something more rooted in plot and characters. That was what we finally decided on.

Seurat experimented with the color wheel the way one experiments with a scale. He used complementary color exactly the way one uses dominant and tonic harmony. When you start thinking about it, there are all kinds of analogies. It started from the painting and the more I found out about Seurat, the more I realized, ‘My God, this is all about music.’

“Move On” is both an extension and a development of “We Do Not Belong Together,” which in turn is an extension and a development of the lyrical section of “Color and Light,” the seeds of which, both musical and verbal, have been planted in the interlude of “Sunday in the Park with George.” They are four parts of one long musical arc, something more apparent when they are sung than on the printed page. They could be read as a mini-musical of their own: Boy Loves Girl, Boy Loves Art, Boy Loses Girl, Boy Gets Both Girl and Art a Hundred Years Later. All the musical themes of the love story culminate and intertwine in “Move On.” The lyric is meant to connect with the earlier ones, distantly, just the way the young George connects with his roots in the painting; words and phrases like “the way she catches light” and “the color of her hair” are echoed along with the music. If it works, if “Move On” feels like a satisfying and touching resolution as it does to me, it’s a tribute to my First Principle: Less Is More.

Dot is the antagonist and George is the protagonist. It’s the old classical principle: she makes him change. He takes the trip. It’s all about how he connects with the past and with the continuum of humanity. The spirit of Dot in the painting is exactly what makes him do it. But he’s the one who comes to a recognition at the end. If you don’t connect with the past, you can’t go on. People who say the second act’s not necessary misunderstand the play. The second act is what it’s about. The first act’s the set-up.

I like neurotic people. I like troubled people. Not that I don’t like squared-away people, but I prefer neurotic people. … What ‘neurotic people’ means to me is people with conflicts. And that’s like saying I like to write about character. I don’t like to write about oversimplified people unless it’s for something like farce, like ‘Forum.’ Songs can’t develop uncomplicated character or unconflicted people. You can’t just tell the sunny side and have a story with any richness to it. Good drama is the study of human passions.

Stephen Sondheim, quoted in In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights by David Savran, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988


James Lapine, quoted in “In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights” by David Savran, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988
With *Sunday in the Park with George*, of course, the structure was built in: the creation of the painting had to be one act, its consequences another. This simplicity was both the good news and the bad news. Some people who saw the show thought it should have been a one-act: the first. James and I never even considered such a possibility. The second act is the point of the show, whether we conveyed it or not. To confine the piece to the first act only would be little more than a stunt; in fact, our worry was not that people might think the second act unnecessary but that they would leave after the first simply because they felt satisfied.


I write personal because I get into characters who are real people, the playwright’s invention. They’re not just vessels to sing A-A-B-A songs. If you get inside a good character, you will always write something that touches people universally. It doesn’t mean it will be a hit, but people can identify because you know that girl, you know that guy. You know who they are and what they’re about.

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Whenever I appeal to anybody under 50, I feel a triumph, seriously. Seriously! Look, popular music changes every generation. And to know that people – a generation or two in this case, or even three generations after you – still like what you did, that’s a big compliment.

The Painter: Georges Seurat

Georges Seurat was born in Paris in 1859, the youngest of three children of bourgeois parents. Seurat’s father Antoine had retired from a civil service job and lived apart from the family, traveling from his suburban house to the city every Tuesday to visit them. Seurat received an education typical of his gender and class, and at age 15 he began his formal art training at a local city drawing school. Three years later, Seurat enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) in Paris to further his study of drawing and painting. As significant, if not more so, than his formal schooling was the reading Seurat did independently – notably critic and aesthetician Charles Blanc’s Grammar of Drawing Arts, from which Seurat began to formulate his theory of color.

After just over a year’s study at the Beaux-Arts, Seurat served a year’s mandatory military service in Brest, Brittany, during which time he continued to draw and to read about art. He returned to Paris in 1880 to launch his career, but his time in Brest had a lifelong influence, as he returned to the French seaside to paint during several summers in the 1880s. (Only his six 1888 paintings from Port-en-Bessin in Normandy feature human figures. One of these is at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.)

From 1880 to 1883, Seurat developed and refined his drawing style and began to paint more regularly. His work from these years show him leaving out details to simplify figures and beginning to build forms through value (light and dark) rather than depending on line. He achieved his mature style sometime in 1882, when his drawings have almost no lines, light and dark define surfaces, and he uses the whole surface of the paper. His early subjects were often laboring peasants; he then turned to suburban and urban settings of industry and recreation.

Around 1881, Seurat likely read a translation of American color theorist Ogden Rood’s Modern Chromatics, which made a particular distinction between light as color and pigment as color. The work of an earlier generation of artists like Ingres (1780-1867), Delacroix (1798-1863) and Corot (1796-1875) were also influential to Seurat’s growing interest in color.

Around 1883, Seurat began the first of his major canvases, “Bathers at Asnières.” He submitted the painting to the official government Salon in 1884, but it was rejected, so he submitted it to the juryless Exposition des Refusés held by the Society of Independent Artists. “Bathers” was hung over the bar and didn’t receive much critical attention. But Seurat never submitted to the Salon again and became deeply involved with and a leader of the Independent Artists.

Shortly after the Independent exhibition, Seurat began work on his “Grande Jatte.” He worked on “Grande Jatte” off and on over the course of two years, visiting the island, making sketches and painting studies. The finished canvas was exhibited in May 1886 at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition. It was his first substantial painting to include groupings of figures, but most notably “Grande Jatte” is the canvas on which Seurat first used his technique of painting with dots, which resulted from his systematic study of color theory. The label given to this style, Pointillism (also called Divisionism and which Seurat himself called Chromo-luminarism), describes putting pure pigments next to each other on the canvas in small strokes rather than mixing it on the palette to resulting in a more luminous and shimmering color mixed by the eye.

While Seurat was certainly aware of and affected by the work of Monet, Pissarro and other Impressionists, there is some question whether he would have been identified with or if he self-identified as an Impressionist. His inclusion in the Eighth Exhibition was controversial, an indication of the rift that had arisen in the movement between romantic and scientific impressionists. Seurat himself was proud of having helped to found and lead the Neo-Impressionist movement. A reaction against the observed, spontaneous realism of the Impressionists, Neo-Impressionism applied scientific principles to create formal compositions.

Four more major canvases followed: “Circus Sideshow” and “The Models” (1888), in which Seurat explored different qualities of light. His final two major
canvases show his interest in the nightlife and entertainment of Paris, followed by “The Can-Can” (1890), an interior with a sense of humor, and “The Circus” (1891), which shows Seurat’s evolution to focus less on depth of perspective and more on line, surface and color.

Sometime in the late 1880s, Seurat met Madeleine Knobloch, who is pictured in his “Young Woman Powdering Herself,” and she gave birth to their son Pierre-Georges in February 1890. His family only learned about Madeleine and his son when she brought him to his mother’s house after he suddenly fell ill while preparing for the latest Independent Artists exhibition. He passed away on March 29, 1891, and his son died a couple of weeks later of the same (unknown) disease. Seurat and his son were buried in the family vault at Père Lachaise cemetery.

— Carla Steen, production dramaturg
The Painting: “Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte”

This 2x3-meter painting is usually considered to be Seurat’s masterpiece. It was while working on this painting that he developed his pointillist technique, painting with unmixed dots of pure color in varying sizes placed on the canvas to allow the colors to mix optically when viewed. Seurat began work on “Grande Jatte” after the 1884 Independent Artists exhibition, visiting the Island of Grande Jatte daily for six months, according to his friend and fellow artist Paul Signac, to make his studies for the painting. In December of 1884, he exhibited a 27x33-inch canvas landscape study for “Grande Jatte” (plus some smaller panel studies) with the Independent Artists, and it appears the painting was finished in time to exhibit in March 1885, but the Independent Artists cancelled the planned show. Seurat stepped away from working on the painting to spend the summer in Grandcamp then resumed work on the painting when he returned to Paris. The underlying brushstrokes are in his older balayé (sweeping) style, with the pointillist stroke layered on top. The painting was exhibited in May 1886 at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition. Like with “Bathers,” Seurat’s studies included numerous paintings on panels and drawings in crayon.

— Carla Steen, production dramaturg

One might call this “Sunday Afternoon” of Seurat’s more of a poem than a picture. Every life-like detail is bathed in a flood of sunlight, in which the figures have cast away their every day cares to stroll, rest or take their pleasures on the banks of a river as full of joy as they are themselves. It is true that the customs and fashions of the age imposed certain restraints and conventions, such as the parasols which protect the ladies’ complexions. But this “period costume” gives the observer today an added pleasure, when he marks how Seurat combines the billowing skirts and the lady’s bustle with the curve of her parasol and the rhythm of the tree trunks and notes the clever interplay of sunlit and shadowed surfaces on the leaves. All this unites in a cheerful summer pastorale as broad and peaceful as the river itself.

The happy colour harmony is effected with far fewer primary tones than is apparent at first glance. The painter attains a luminosity full of gaiety, chiefly by the subtlety of his arrangement of complementary reds and greens. Nevertheless the first exhibition of this picture in 1886 was greeted with more mockery than approval. Few at that time would appreciate the power of this artist who allowed himself to fix his figures architecturally in a Garden of Eden, stretching in profile from left to right and carried on in due hierarchy into the distance. But what is lost in individual abandon by this process, is repaid a thousandfold in the “joie de vivre” of the whole scene. Perhaps just this was too much for the spirit of the age to accept.

— Hermann Jedding, Gallery of Art Series, “Seurat”
THE MOVEMENT: NEO-IMPRESSIONISM

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, a new school of thought emerged within the Impressionists. Led by Seurat, its scientific, methodical approach was a decided pushback against the individualistic, spontaneous style of the Impressionists. Seurat approached his art from a scientific, theory-based standpoint. He studied color theory extensively, particularly the theories developed by American physicist and amateur painter Ogden Rood. He was also inspired by the French Romantic artist Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) and the analysis of Delacroix’s work with color by art historian Charles Blanc.

This pushback was largely against the formlessness and ambivalence of Impressionism. Although the Impressionists ultimately were successful in breaking through the accepted norms of painting, focusing art on the modern world and opening the door for new forms of art to be developed, there was no unified artistic statement being made, particularly because the artists who were taking part in it applied the “rules” of impressionism with varying degrees of strictness. Seurat, on the other hand, wanted to theorize everything about his art to create a “formula” for painting. In a dramatic contrast to the Impressionists, he was more interested in using the contemporary science available to him to create something enduring, rather than focusing on the fleeting moment.

Using Rood’s theories of light and complementary color, Seurat developed his own painting theories. Rood believed that placing contrasting colors next to each other resulted in a genuine mélange optique (optical mixing) where the individual colors would both be more vibrant and create a mixing of the colors from a certain distance away. (For instance, yellow and blue placed next to each other would appear to create a more vibrant green color from a certain distance.) In reality, the colors don’t actually mix, but the method does create a luminescent/vibratory effect in the painting, which more realistically portrays light as it is in life. To the Neo-Impressionists, separating colors into the hues that made them creates more “light” in a painting and avoids the dullness that came from blending colors manually.

Neo-Impressionists at first self-identified as impressionistes scientifiques as opposed to the impressionistes romantiques whose ideas they were building on. Science dominated over emotion in their techniques, or science was the vehicle by which emotion was expressed. Key to Seurat’s later work in Neo-Impressionism was his study of lines and their associations with emotion. He worked on inciting emotions in the viewer by using specific line direction and shape in concert with his vibrant colors. Specifically, it was believed that upward-moving lines and warm colors could be used to express activity and feelings of joy, whereas downward-moving lines and cooler colors would express stillness and melancholy. This was not “new” theory when Seurat was experimenting with it—it had been around informally and without formula for centuries—but his attempt to create rules about the movements of lines and colors speaks to his attempt to approach painting from a completely scientific standpoint for optimal results.

Seurat met Paul Signac, a student of the Impressionist school, in 1884 when they both exhibited at the first Salon of Independent Artists, which was a direct response to the difficulty new artists had getting their works noticed. Signac was so taken with Seurat’s ideas that he gradually “converted” to Neo-Impressionism. Together, they were at the forefront of expanding the movement further both geographically and artistically. Seurat and Signac were invited to exhibit in Brussels in 1886, where Neo-Impressionism later became the major artistic movement. The eighth and final Impressionist Exhibition took place in 1886, and Seurat and Signac participated, showcasing their Scientific Impressionist works. However, their inclusion in this exhibition resulted in many of the Romantic Impressionists refusing to participate, as they did not believe that Seurat and Signac were representative of their spontaneous, emotionally-driven Impressionist art. This was the exhibition in which “Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte” was shown, and the critical response largely agreed that Seurat’s work was a redevelopment of or next step beyond Impressionism. Seurat was at the forefront of Neo-Impressionism, and it essentially died out with no further advancements being made upon his death in 1891. Neo-Impressionism did tangentially lead to other artistic movements, such as Post-Impressionism (think Picasso and Van Gogh) and the avant garde. It would have a passing influence on other artists such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Gauguin.

— Emily Gustafson, currently an intern in the Literary Department
CULTURAL CONTEXT

ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES OF ART mentioned by the Georges (and Jules) in the play

Design
The creative idea or plan the artist intends to execute in a work of art; conveys intentionality and creation (to design – an action) in addition to the way components are put together (the design – a thing).

Composition
The way a work of art is organized, arranged or structured to provide to the viewer with the most clarity the information the artist wants to convey.

Balance
The way the various elements of art – line, shape, form, color, etc. – are distributed in a work of art, ideally conveying a feeling of equilibrium or stability. Can be symmetrical (similar on both sides), asymmetrical (different on each side but still feels balanced) or radial (arranged around a central point).

Light
Light triggers the ability to see, reveals texture, form and contour, affects the quality and value of color. Through pointillism (the technique of applying paint in dots) and divisionism (applying colors separately onto the canvas so they mix optically upon viewing), Seurat hoped to capture in paint the luminosity, vibration and brilliance of light as seen in nature.

Harmony
Combining the elements of art so they work together and complement each other to form a consistent and orderly whole. “When paintings are done right, harmony appears by itself,” said Cezanne.

“Through design. Composition.

Balance. Light. And harmony.”
(George, act one)

Order
Arrangement, often methodical; related to composition.

Tone
The lightness or darkness of an object. Seurat’s black Conté crayon drawings create forms through layers of tone – more crayon is darker, less is lighter and a form is distinguished only through light and dark (not line or color). Tone can also refer to color (light or dark) and can relate to hue (the spectrum of red, yellow, green, blue, etc.). A warm or cool tone relates to hue; a dark or light tone refers to brightness.

Form
A shape that conveys three-dimensionality (ball vs. circle). Can be geometrical or free-flowing.

Symmetry
An element of balance in which elements are placed with exact or similar distribution on opposite parts.

(George, act one)

Color
The constituents into which light can be divided in a spectrum or rainbow. White is pure light; black is the absence of light. Color as an element of art is composed of hue, value and intensity. Hue is the name of the color (red, blue, yellow, green, etc.). Value, like tone, relates to how light or dark it is – the hue changes with the addition of white or black. And intensity is the quality of brightness or dullness. Primary colors (red, yellow, blue) are the only true colors. Everything is a mix of those three. Secondary colors are a mix of two primary colors. Tertiary colors are a mix of a primary and secondary. Complementary colors are directly across from each other on the color wheel [next page] and contrast well because they have no common colors.

“Color and light. / There’s only color and light.” (George, act one)

Perspective
Putting objects on a two-dimensional surface so they convey a sense of proportion, position and distance which relates to how they would look in three dimensions. Jules is also referring to Seurat’s ability to look at the canvas with enough distance to be able to evaluate the painting’s perspective. “It is so large. How can you get any perspective?” (Jules, act one)

Tension
Conflict created by the interplay of the various elements of art, keeping the piece interesting. Tension might be created by the pairing of opposites (hard-soft, straight-curved, light-dark, loud-soft, big-small, good-evil). Tension can complicate a viewer’s reaction to the art, which is good, and keeps it from being boring. Neutral compositions lack tension and are therefore often dull.


— Carla Steen, production dramaturg
PARIS IN THE 1880S

During the Second Empire (1852-1870), Paris underwent substantial urban renewal. Boulevards were widened, streetlamps added (to create the “city of lights”), new aqueducts and sewers built, the Louvre was completed, six major railway stations constructed, many suburbs were annexed to the city proper, huge parks were built, and more. The population boomed, though most of the newcomers settled in first-ring suburbs because the city center itself lost substantial housing to these changes. By 1869, the major cities of France were connected by rail, the production of coal, iron and steel boomed, and the financial system was overhauled and stabilized.

In 1870, the Second Empire collapsed, in part because of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). Hoping to secure Southern German states as part of a united Germany, Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck provoked France into declaring war. Sure enough, the southern states saw France as the aggressor and came to Prussia’s aid. Emperor Napoleon III thought the recently reorganized French army could defeat the Prussians, but France was slow to mobilize and disorganized. The primary fighting lasted less than two months, and Napoleon surrendered in early September. But a resistance movement in Paris declared the emperor deposed, established a republic (the Third) and carried on fighting. The Prussians began a siege of Paris and the city finally surrendered in January 1871.

The peace terms included plans to elect a new French National Assembly in Versailles (so there would be a government to negotiate the treaty, among other things; this also moved the capital from Paris to Versailles), but the new Assembly was dominated by conservative royalists. Republicans in Paris feared the monarchy would be restored and objected to the dishonorable terms of the subsequent treaty with Germany. So a rebel faction established - through city elections and control of the National Guard’s cannons in the city - yet another government called the Paris Commune which hearkened back to the revolutionary ideals of 1789. The Versailles government put down the Commune in what is now called “the Week of Blood,” in which 20,000 or more Parisians were killed (compared to 2,600 in Paris during the 16-month Reign of Terror in the previous century). Parts of the city were burned by both sides, and a particular bourgeois-proletariat divide was revealed. The fall of the Paris Commune also wiped out the major leaders of the socialist and labor factions and left the working class feeling more alienated than before; this vacuum was filled by Marxists in the 1880s, which culminated in the founding in 1889 of the Second International (or Socialist International), a federation of socialist parties and trade unions that shaped the labor movement until World War I.

France’s defeat by Prussia meant it was no longer the dominant power in Europe; Germany completed its unification, including the annexation of Alsace and half of Lorraine from France. But the Third Republic was established, and after some fits and starts as monarchists and republicans continued to grapple for control, a new constitution was adopted in 1875, creating a two-house legislature, council of ministers and a president. With this new government in place, the National Assembly was dissolved. Industrialization flourished (captured in some of Seurat’s paintings) and a professional civil service was established. In 1878, the Republic held an International Exposition that proved vastly more successful than the previous two held in the country under the Orleans monarchy and Second Empire. In 1879, the capital was moved from Versailles back to Paris.

During the 1880s, when Seurat was most actively painting, the government was under the control of a moderate and cautious branch of republicans. Free, secular, mandatory primary education for boys and girls to age 13 was established, suffrage was given to all men (not women), and French colonialism created the beginnings of the French empire. Secondary school, such as the art school Seurat attended, remained largely a bourgeois opportunity, but in 1880 the first secondary schools for girls were established.

Army activity during the 1880s included military support for ongoing colonization, specifically using Algeria as a base to make expeditions into Tunisia, the exploration of Congo and its subsequent establishment as a French protectorate, and expansion of French control in Vietnam so that by 1883 the French protectorates of Tonkin and Annam joined the already-established French colony around Saigon. In 1881, new laws secured liberties restricted by old Empire laws: cafes and bars could be opened (previously they’d been subject to the whim of local officials), and these businesses became hangouts for political discussions and meetings, such as those Seurat attended for the Society of Independent Artists. Public assembly and freedom of the press were also enacted in law. In 1884, divorce and trade unions were also legalized. But laborers still had to carry the “worker passport”
enacted in 1803, which had to be presented like a travel document and effectively could control the movement and schedule of the working class.

In 1883, the final Bourbon claimant to the throne died, and in 1886 members of the remaining former ruling families – Bonaparte and Orleans – were banished from France. In 1889, Paris hosted its fourth International Exposition, which was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution and to celebrate the republican system, in place since 1870, which had kept both royalists and Bonapartists at bay. Gustave Eiffel won a contest to design a monument to mark the occasion, and between 1887 and 1889, his 300-meter tower of iron was constructed.

— Carla Steen, production dramaturg
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