



Seurat and Matisse: Influence, Tradition, and the Legacy of Divisionism

By: Justin Earp
Faculty mentor: Seth McCormick

Abstract

In a historical context, Georges Seurat is and will always be regarded as the quintessential divisionist painter. He launched an artistic revolution, beginning with his work to establish a radically new style to close out the nineteenth century, and continuing into his indirect influence on Henri Matisse, who helped to revolutionize twentieth century art and beyond. Seurat was a diligent worker who left nothing to chance in constructing his work. He studied and grinded through every minute detail of the process, and if it were not for this diligence, we may not have seen neo-impressionism become the juggernaut of a movement that we know it as today. Seurat's influence on his contemporaries was clear, as he was able to amass a group of artists who adopted his style and artistic ideals. It is difficult to say just how much differently the story of twentieth century art might have been told if Matisse never delved into Seurat's ideals, but it is safe to say that art history would have been changed. Whatever the reasons for Matisse's decision to begin the Fauvist movement are largely irrelevant to the fact that Seurat's influence challenged Matisse to learn more about himself as an artist. His trials and tribulations through divisionism guided him toward an outlet of expression that he had been searching for all along. It helped him find freedom and originality, and many artists who followed would be greatly influenced. In this exhibit, I explore that influence and relate the same artistic ideals to my own work in divisionism and neo-impressionism.

Earp, J. (2020, April). *Seurat and Matisse: Influence, Tradition, and the Legacy of Divisionism*. Painting exhibit and paper submitted to the Research and Scholarship Conference, Western Carolina University.

Archived version from NC DOCKS available at: <https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/wcu/listing.aspx?styp=ti&id=31338>.

Seurat and Matisse: Influence, Tradition, and the Legacy of Divisionism

An Exhibit and Essay by Justin Earp

In a historical context, Georges Seurat is and will always be regarded as the quintessential divisionist painter. He launched an artistic revolution, beginning with his work to establish a radically new style to close out the nineteenth century, and continuing into his indirect influence on Henri Matisse, who helped to revolutionize twentieth century art and beyond. Seurat was a diligent worker who left nothing to chance in constructing his work. He studied and grinded through every minute detail of the process, and if it were not for this diligence, we may not have seen neo-impressionism become the juggernaut of a movement that we know it as today. Seurat's influence on his contemporaries was clear, as he was able to amass a group of artists who adopted his style and artistic ideals. It is difficult to say just how much differently the story of twentieth century art might have been told if Matisse never delved into Seurat's ideals, but it is safe to say that art history would have been changed. Whatever the reasons for Matisse's decision to begin the Fauvist movement are largely irrelevant to the fact that Seurat's influence challenged Matisse to learn more about himself as an artist. His trials and tribulations through divisionism guided him toward an outlet of expression that he had been searching for all along. It helped him find freedom and originality, and many artists who followed would be greatly influenced. In this exhibit, I explore that influence and relate the same artistic ideals to my own work in divisionism and neo-impressionism. My following works "Window" and "Encore" exhibit these ideals and style, which is fleshed out in my essay which follows.

Exhibiting Works:



Justin Earp, Window, 2017, Oil on Canvas, 16x20"



*Justin Earp, **Encore**, 2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 16x20”*

Essay:

Seurat and Matisse: Influence, Tradition, and the Legacy of Divisionism

At the “Eighth Exhibition of Paintings” (formerly known as the impressionist exhibition) in Paris in May of 1886, Georges Seurat first exhibited what would become his most well-known piece, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (otherwise known simply as *La*

Grande Jatte). The initial reactions to this piece were mixed, with many critics failing to even acknowledge the work. Seurat's new technique, known as pointillism (or divisionism) was nothing more than a failed experiment to some, but others began to pay attention to the rising French artist. By January of 1888, Seurat was exhibiting alongside the likes of Manet, Pissarro, Cross, and Signac in *Revue Independante*, a French-based artistic journal. (Herbert et al. 19) As a driving force in the neo-impressionist movement, Seurat was already cementing himself a position as an art revolutionary; his bold new style, coupled with his focus on scientific theory and painstaking detail in his work, held him above those who propagated his neo-impressionist ideals. Among those who were influenced by Seurat, two important figures who will be discussed in this paper are Henri-Edmond Cross and Paul Signac. Cross and Signac carried Seurat's legacy into the early twentieth century, and it is through these two artists that Henri Matisse ultimately studied divisionism and neo-impressionism. Matisse's differences in artistic ideals, however, kept this period rather brief. In this paper, I will discuss the influence which Seurat had on Matisse, as well as the similarities and differences that Matisse's take(s) on divisionism have with Seurat's work. I will also explore those differences Seurat and Matisse had personally which kept Matisse from reaching fulfillment in the divisionist style. These differences had partially to do with the man himself, but perhaps even more to do with the call of the art world and the change that Matisse felt and believed the artistic landscape needed.

"Pointillism describes the methodical application of paint in dots or small dabs of color clearly evident to the eye, a method invented by Seurat. But the word is often incorrectly used to describe the grander aspects of Seurat's painting." (Shone 10) Signac shares this sentiment, as he believes that "...many people unresponsive to the effects of harmony, color, and light,

have seen only the method... division is a complex system of harmony, an aesthetic rather than a technique. The dot is only a means." (Flubacher 17) As such, I will refer to the movement primarily as divisionism, although neo-impressionism seems to be an acceptable term as well. Seurat believes that "...this break with [Impressionism] had the merit of stressing the Impressionist connection" (Flubacher 16). For Seurat, "a painting was a harmony of colors, rhythms, and lines." (Quinsac 33) He believed that through scientific method and intense study of a multitude of theory, color and light could be controlled and expressed uniquely. His "systematic handling of color and the development of a controlling pictorial light; in contrast to the varied reflections of natural light... moved him even further away from the Impressionists." (Shone 38) In its search for synthesis, this brought Seurat's aesthetic back toward Classicism, in the sense that it "draws on the archetype as much as reality, and as such marked a break with approaches that sought to rapidly record reality as perceived by the eye," such as Impressionism. (Quinsac 22) When it comes down to the mind of the artist himself, there were three main concepts which headlined Seurat's "mission," the first being the celebration of the power of pure color. This idea was based around "...the elimination of sullied and dull pigment mixtures...the purity of the spectral element being the keystone of [the] technique." (Herbert et al. 23) The second concept is the expressive power of line, color, and value in the context of composition, where upward-moving lines represent gaiety, downward-moving lines sadness, and horizontal lines calm. This concept "seems to supplant color theory as Seurat's guiding interest after 1886." (Herbert et al. 23-24) Finally, the third idea is simply the reform of Impressionism, necessary since "Seurat regarded Impressionism as too indecisive... he searched for structure." (Herbert et al. 24)

“It was generally believed [in the late nineteenth century] that a manner and a technique of painting could be devised which would be definitive. Many thought Seurat’s method might well provide the solution sought by all artists.” (Herbert et al. 18) Of course, for Seurat, this structure was found in the scientific theory of painting itself, primarily in the color theory which he worked to perfect. Seurat was introduced to much of his concepts on color theory by the French art critic Charles Blanc. He believed that “separate touches of pigment will tend to form more pure and vibrant colors in the observer’s eye than would be formed by the more traditional mixing of pigments on the palette.” (Herbert et al. 24) This concept, known as optical mixing, certainly lends itself to the aesthetics of divisionism, as Seurat used it often to vary the levels of intensity within the colors in his works. For example,

White applied next to a color enhances the value, it is as if one removed from the color the white light which weakens its intensity,...grey applied next to a color makes the color seem more brilliant, and at the same time grey is tinted with the complementary tone of the adjacent colors,... [and] a darker color next to a different lighter color results in a higher value of the former and a lower value of the latter, independently of the mixing of the complementaries. (Herbert et al. 24)

Clearly, to Seurat, this revolutionary new look at color came from essentially tricking the human eye into seeing hues that are simply specks of other hues intermingling. Optical mixing became a cornerstone of Seurat’s art and was used subsequently by followers such as Cross and Signac, though Seurat was the true pioneer of this exciting, new color theory. Another integral part of Seurat’s color theory is the distinction between color-light and color-pigment. For example, although a mixture of blue and yellow pigments will produce a green pigment, the mixture of

blue and yellow light will produce a pale gray. (Herbert et al. 24-28) All of these aspects of color theory resulted in the meticulous study of scientific theory and the repeated application of such a theory by Seurat. As such, the color theory he embodied in such works as *La Grande Jatte* became the standard for that of neo-impressionism.

Independent from the direct influence of Seurat, other artists also began to find themselves keen on rejecting the Impressionist style in the latter stages of the nineteenth century. During a stay in London in 1898, the young artist Henri Matisse saw his first exposure to the sun in the context of painting. This sudden change was a bit rough for Matisse's art, given his unfamiliarity with including such an intense sunlight in his compositions coupled with his inadequate mastery of the impressionist palette. He found himself unable to "organize [his] sensations", and his works took on an "epileptic...panicky character" as if his paintings were "done by someone gnashing his teeth". (Bois 9) It was not too long after these scathing reviews of his recent work that Matisse found himself in Paris, where "it is doubtless at this time that he purchases two issues of *La Revue blanche*, in which the first six chapters of Paul Signac's *De Delacroix au neo-impressionnisme* had just appeared." (Bois 9) Of course, Signac was one of the primary proponents of Seurat's divisionist style, referred to by Signac as neo-impressionism. This work had no immediate effect on Matisse's work, but in the coming months, Matisse took it upon himself to study Signac's principles and began to put them into practice. By all accounts, after only a few short months, Matisse was "in a position to produce an orthodox divisionist piece, a painting that could be seen as even more faithful to the theory than those done by divisionist painters of the same period." (Bois 11) In producing divisionist works such as *Sideboard and Table* in 1899, Matisse was following compositional rules created by Seurat

himself, such as the psychology of the line and color theory. However, although his efforts were supported by Signac, Matisse deemed his venture into neo-impressionism a failure seemingly before it could truly begin. The style simply did not seem to please Matisse aesthetically, as he would elaborate more on after his second attempt at divisionism. This self-evident failure pushed him toward a new style which would ultimately become Fauvism, during which point his “concern is with modeling and representation of space.” (Bois 13)

After much more direct experience with the divisionist style, as well as an urging from neo-impressionist artist Henri-Edmond Cross to give it another try, (Bois 14) Matisse reentered the world of divisionism with *Luxe, calme et volupte* in 1904. Signac was thrilled to see Matisse back on his side and bought the painting himself, but Matisse was not pleased. Even though the works which he produced during this time were hailed by the neo-impressionists as wonderful, successful pieces, the style was not able to resonate with Matisse in the same way. Of his trials with divisionism, Matisse states that “the breaking up of color led to the breaking up of form, of contour. Result: a jumpy surface. There is only retinal sensation, but it destroys the calm of the surface and of the contour. Objects are differentiated only by the luminosity given them. Everything is treated in the same way. Ultimately there is only a tactile vitality comparable to the ‘vibrato’ of the violin or voice.” (Bois 17) The most key element, the division of the colors themselves, seemed to be one of the major factors which Matisse could not get behind, along with the scientific theory of the style. “...A few months later...I no longer thought about all the rules and regulations,” Matisse reminisced. (Bois 17) After the decidedly Fauvist *Salon d’Automne* of 1905, he had abandoned the divisionist style altogether, this time for good. Signac was furious about this development, as he felt that Matisse was essentially throwing

away his artistic potential. After viewing Matisse's first decidedly Fauvist work, *La Bonheur de Vivre*, Signac was aghast: "Matisse, whose attempts I have liked up to now, seems to me to have gone to the dogs... he has surrounded some strange characters with a line as thick as your thumb. Then he has covered the whole thing with flat, well-defined tints, which – however pure – seem disgusting." (Bois 18) It seems the most fundamental reason for Matisse turning away from divisionism was a continuation of his search for a style which could enable him to break away from "the old academic prejudice that... had seen color merely as a supplement to drawing." (Bois 20) He could not make peace with Seurat's color theories, as they were fundamentally tied to compositional color being a sum of small parts, rather than the bold planes of color that Matisse wanted to work in. At that point, Matisse's legacy as pioneer of the Fauvist style was set, but the works and influences that led him there can simply not be ignored.

To understand the similarities and differences that Seurat's divisionist style has with Matisse's, one needs to look no further than a comparison between *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* and *Luxe, calme et volupte*. First of all, the most apparent difference is the way in which the two artists "divide" their colors. Seurat's dots of color are much smaller and more refined, while Matisse's are somewhat larger with less of a "polished" look. As a result, there is certainly a greater level of detail in *La Grande Jatte*, the figures as well as the scene around the figures is much cleaner and more refined. One reason that this is the case is because of Seurat's unparalleled preparation for his paintings. In preparation for *La Grande Jatte*, he produced "27 panels, three canvases, and 27 drawings" (Quinsac 33) as studies for the individual aspects of the painting as a whole. While Matisse certainly prepared and utilized a

similar scientific theory with his divisionist works, his looser style is apparent, as well as his propensity to subtly separate his colors in a manner not seen in Seurat's work. It is also worth noting that the colors which Matisse uses in this piece are much more consistent with the vibrant, eye-catching colors of Fauvism than typical neo-impressionist works. The colors in Seurat's piece are noticeably truer to life and meticulously calculated, which is not to say that Matisse's are not planned deliberately as well, only that Seurat employed a more grounded color scheme than Matisse was willing to use. This discrepancy stems from the fact that Matisse felt as if this divisionist style was essentially holding him back from the types of works he truly wanted to create. About his later decision to focus solely on Fauvism, Matisse said that "above all, I was no longer able to restrain my drawing, and I was tempted to put in too much of it." (Bois 21) This quote serves to illustrate the fact that Matisse had no interest in tying himself down to someone else's style and set of rules to create art, he wanted to carve his own path in which there would be no limitations outside of the ones he would set for himself. His temptation to "put in too much of it" was likely the constant urge to branch off into Fauvism, which he ultimately did in his abandonment of divisionism. For all the talent and capability Matisse had, Seurat's style was just not one that suited his artistic eye. The fundamental difference between the two artists' works in divisionism boil down to the level of commitment each man had to the movement. Seurat's commitment to his craft was unprecedented, while Matisse's interest lay elsewhere.

In a historical context, Seurat is and will always be regarded as the quintessential divisionist painter. He started an artistic revolution in many ways, starting with his work to establish a radically new style to close out the nineteenth century, and continuing into his

indirect influence on Matisse, who helped to revolutionize twentieth century art and beyond. “Thanks to divisionism, color could now be taught,” (Quinsac 28) thus color began to become so much more than a second thought in the context of painting. Seurat was a diligent worker who left nothing to chance in constructing his work. He studied and grinded through every minute detail of the process, and if it were not for this diligence, we may not have seen neo-impressionism become the juggernaut of a movement that we know it as today. Seurat’s influence on his contemporaries was clear, as he was able to amass a group of artists who adopted his style and artistic ideals. Although he lived a short life, dying at the age of 31, he had already cemented a legacy that his followers would pass on to the coming generations, just as Signac did with Matisse. It is difficult to say just how different twentieth century art might have been if Matisse never delved into Seurat’s ideals, but I believe it is safe to say that history would have been changed. Each time Matisse studied divisionism, he felt that something was missing, whether it be within himself and his own techniques or within the artistic movement at large. His first expedition with divisionism resulted in something of a tune-up of his technique, which he felt was lacking in the areas of modeling and representation of space. (Bois 13) The second seemed to frustrate Matisse to the point of epiphany: the neo-impressionism movement would never be able to fulfill the goals he had set for his artistic endeavors, this “expression by drawing” that he strove to uphold. Whatever the reasons for Matisse’s decision to begin the Fauvist movement are largely irrelevant to the fact that Seurat’s influence challenged Matisse to learn more about himself as an artist. His trials and tribulations through divisionism guided him toward an outlet of expression that he had been searching for all along. It helped him find freedom and originality, and many artists who followed would be greatly influenced. In the

grand tale of art history, one would not necessarily think that Seurat's influence on Matisse is a point of great consequence, and on the surface, it certainly is not obvious. However, one cannot tell the story of twentieth century art without noting the early influence of Matisse, and one cannot note such influence without including the lasting ideals of Seurat. The divisionist theory of art is not one that necessarily took the art world by storm for a particularly lengthy amount of time, but its place will be remembered. Art history, just like world history at large, is a continuous tale with overlapping tales and captivating anecdotes which pervade the memories of millions. Georges Seurat, Henri Matisse, and divisionism are no exception, and they will not be forgotten so long as lovers of art and purveyors of tradition continue to flourish.

References:

Flubacher, Christophe, and Annie-Paule Quinsac. Divisionism - Mastery of Color? Effusion of Color!: Hatje Cantz, 2014.

Bois, Yve-Alain. Painting as Model. MIT Press, 1998.

Shone, Richard. The Post-Impressionists. John Calmann & Cooper Limited, 1979.

Herbert, Robert L., et al. The Neo-Impressionists. Edited by Jean Sutter, Thames and Hudson, 1971.