

Paul Signac

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Is an artist not someone who strives to create unity within variety by the rhythm of colours and tones, and who puts science to the service of his feelings?

— Paul Signac

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Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, 1890.

Conté, 36.5 x 31.6 cm.

Private collection.

BIOGRAPHY

11 November 1863: Paul Signac was born in Paris, to a family of bourgeois merchants.

1880: Although his family wished him to pursue architecture as a career, Signac left high school before he had completed his final exams to focus on becoming an artist. He moved to Montmartre and immersed himself in the work of the Impressionists and Claude Monet. He met Berthe Roblès, who he would marry ten years later, who happened to be a distant cousin of Camille Pissaro.

1882-1883: His first works depicted the views from Montmartre and Asnières-sur-Seine (his family home), and studies of women, notably of Berthe Roblès. His painting was heavily influenced by Monet.

1884: He showed his first canvas at the Salon des Indépendants, which was located in the courtyards of the Tuileries, and participated in the foundation of the Société des Artistes Indépendants. He befriended Georges Seurat, who was to have a great influence on him. At this time he also encountered Pissaro.

December 1886: Seurat, Signac, and Pissaro had their work shown at the time of an impressive exhibition organised by the Société des Artistes Indépendants. Their techniques were completely different; they painted using slight brushstrokes, and juxtaposed their pure colours. It was the technique known as Divisionism. The term “Neo-Impressionism” was used for the first time by the art critic Félix Fénéon.

1887: Signac felt a strong attachment to the sea and painted numerous seascapes. He moved to the South of France and encountered Van Gogh.

1889: He spent the summer at the Mediterranean coast, visiting Van Gogh who was also located there.

1891: After Seurat’s death, Signac left Paris for Brittany, and then left to settle in Saint-Tropez with his wife and his mother. He painted his first luminous watercolours and tried his hand at large decorative paintings.

1893: After the publication of the first edition of Delacroix’s *Journal*, Signac decided to also write a journal. In this, he explained the evolution of his own work and his doubts as well as his reflections on being an artist during that period. He also renounced the practice of painting outdoors.

P. Signac

1896: He drafted *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*, a work in which he explained the technique which inspired Neo-Impressionism, appearing in 1899.

1902: He showed one hundred watercolours at Siegfried Bing's art gallery.

1908: He became President of the Société des Artistes Indépendants, and so remained until his death. In this year certain painters embarked on a pilgrimage to Signac's home in Saint-Tropez, notably Matisse and Maurice Denis. He also travelled to Venice.

1911: He exhibited his watercolours *The Bridges of Paris* at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery. Watercolours took precedence over oil paintings.

1915: He moved to Antibes and was named *Peintre officiel de la Marine*.

1929: He started a series of watercolours of the French ports, which led him to visit numerous coastal regions.

15 August 1935: Signac died, aged 72, following a prolonged illness.

DOCUMENTS

Divisionism

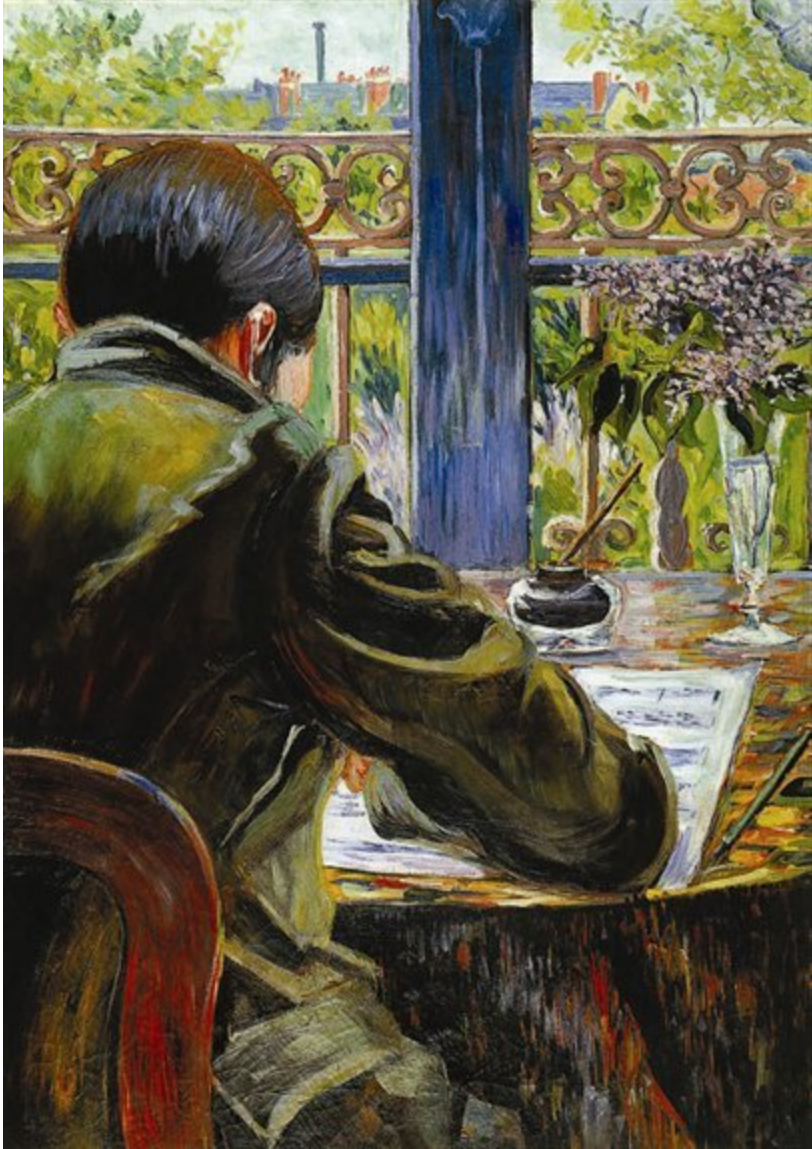
The belief that the Neo-Impressionists are artists who cover their canvasses with small multicoloured dots is a fairly widespread misconception. We will demonstrate later, but affirm now, that this mediocre process of dots has nothing in common with the aesthetics of the painters who we are here championing, nor with their employed technique of Divisionism.

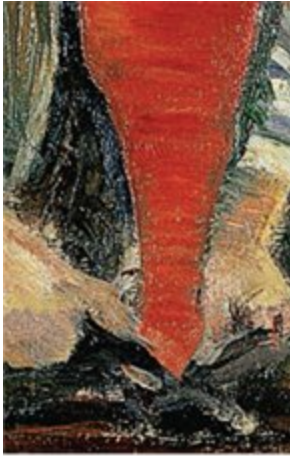


Asnières Study
(Charles Torquet Seen from
Behind)

1883

Oil on canvas, 92.5 x 65 cm
Private collection





Neo-Impressionism does not stipple, but divides. And yet, to divide is to assure all benefits of luminosity, of colour, and of harmony. This is through the optical blending of uniquely pure pigments (all the colours of a rainbow, and all of their tones), the separation of different elements (restricted colour, colour from illumination, and their effects, etc.), the balance of these elements and their proportions (according to the laws of contrast, degradation, and radiation), and the choice of brushstrokes proportioned to the dimensions of the canvas.

Red Silk Stockings

1883

Oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm

Private collection





The method formulated into these four points therefore governs colour for Neo-Impressionists, of whom the majority apply most mysterious laws disciplining line and direction to their work, thereby ensuring a harmony of beautiful order.



Thus informed about line and colour, the artist will certainly determine the linear and chromatic composition of his painting by using the dominant directions, tones and hues appropriate for the subject he is about to depict.



The Road to Gennevilliers

1883

Oil on canvas, 73 x 91 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris





Before going any further, let's refer ourselves to the authority of the clear and distinguished genius of Eugène Delacroix. It was this great artist who enacted the rules of colour, line, and composition which we have just laid out and which summarise Divisionism.



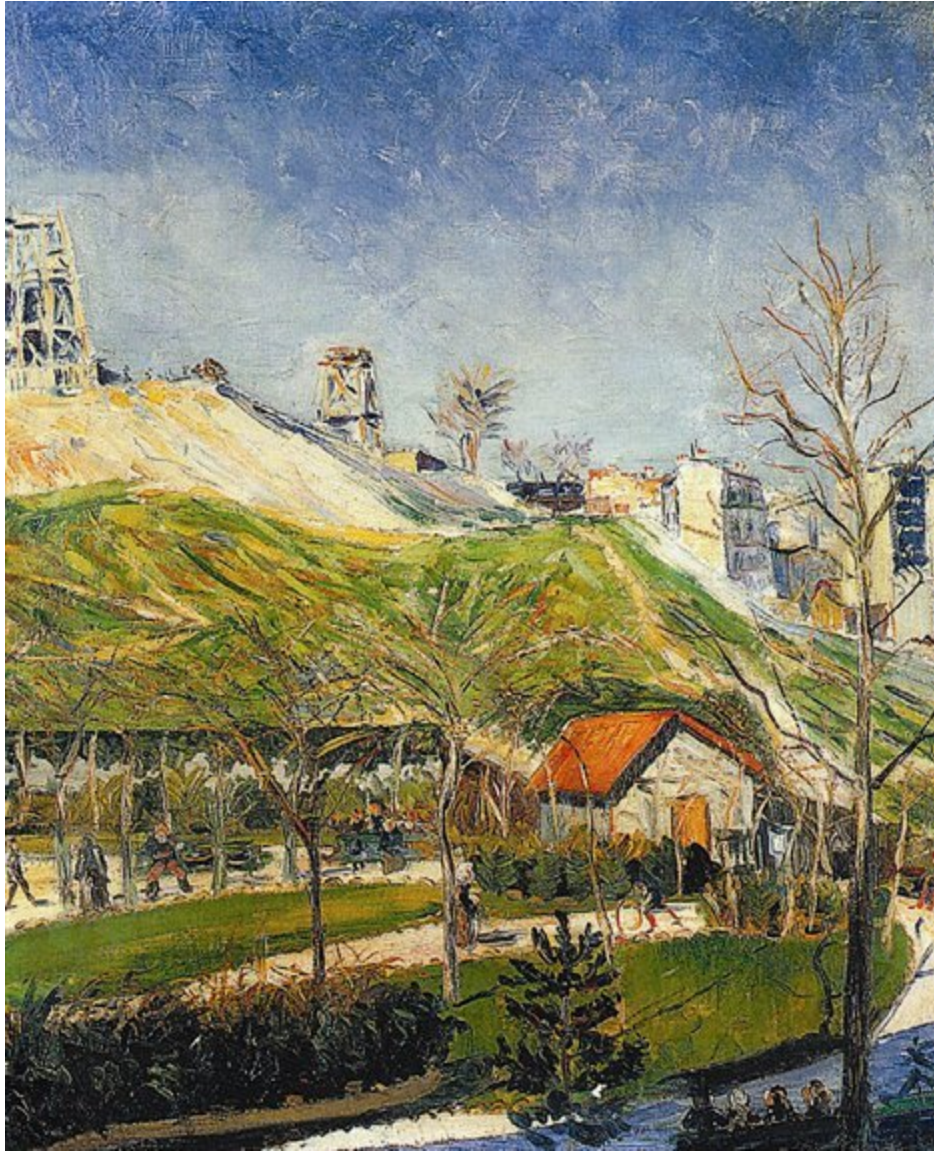
We will examine each part of the aesthetics and technique of the Neo-Impressionists one by one, and then compare them along the same lines as suggested by Delacroix in his letters, articles, and three volumes of his journal (*Journal d'Eugène Delacroix*).



Saint Peter's Square

1883-1884

Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 64.5 cm
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung,
Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel





In this way we will show that these artists are only following the master's instruction and continuing his research.

The aim of the Neo-Impressionists' technique is to obtain a maximum of colour and light. Yet, was this aim not clearly indicated by Delacroix's beautiful cry: "Grey is the enemy of every painter!"? To achieve this bright and colourful lustre, the Neo-Impressionists only used pure colours approaching, as far as material can approach light, the colours of the rainbow. And does this not also obey the advice of he who wrote: "Banish all earth colours?"



Rue Caulaincourt

1884

Oil on canvas, 35 x 27 cm
Gift of Mr and Mrs David Weill,
Musée Carnavalet, Paris





Of these pure colours, which they always respect and make sure not to contaminate as they mix them on the palette (obviously except white and between neighbouring colours, in order to achieve all the colours of the rainbow, and their tones), they layer them in clean brushstrokes of small dimensions. Through optical blending they obtain the desired result, with the advantage that, whilst pigment blending tends to darken and fade, all optical blending tends towards clarity and brilliance.

Port-en-Bessin. The Fish Market

1884

Oil on canvas, 60 x 92 cm
Tai Cheung Holdings Ltd





The Neo-Impressionists only generalised the logic of Delacroix's treatment, imposed on green and purple, and applied it to other colours. Tipped off by the great master's research, and educated by Chevreul's work, they established the use of this method, as it is unique and certain to secure both light and colour. Any untoward pigment mixture can be replaced by its optical blend.



The artists strive to use every flat shade of colour, which may seem feeble and dull, to make even the least part of the canvas shimmer by the optical mixing of brushstrokes of juxtaposed colour gradients.



Port-en-Bessin. La Valleuse

1884

Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 64.5 cm
Museum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo





However, it was Delacroix who first clearly stated the principle and advantages of this method: “It is good that the brushstrokes are not physically blended. They blend naturally at the distance desired by the laws of agreement which link them. Colour, in this way, obtains more energy and freshness.”



The breakdown of colour hues through diminishing brushstroke gradients, a very important part of Divisionism, had been anticipated by the great painter. It was clear that his passion for colour would inevitably lead to seeing the benefits of optical blends.



La Seine. Quai d’Austerlitz
(The Seine from Pont
d’Austerlitz)

Oil on canvas, 60 x 91 cm
Collection Kakinuma, Tokyo

