



GEORGES  
SEURAT

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THE  
DRAWINGS

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Jodi Hauptman

With essays by Karl Buchberg, Hubert Damisch,  
Bridget Riley, Richard Shiff, and Richard Thomson

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Georges Seurat: The Drawings*, October 28, 2007–January 7, 2008, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, organized by Jodi Hauptman, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings.

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# FOREWORD

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In its inaugural exhibition of 1929, The Museum of Modern Art set out to present the pioneers of nineteenth-century art, those artists who, the Museum's founders believed, were the very basis for the challenging work that would be shown at the new institution. Among these artists was Georges Seurat. Seurat, whose work was complimented by the Museum's first director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. for its "strange, almost breathless poise," was in good company; the other three artists "who founded new traditions" were Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Cézanne. For Barr and those trustees who helped establish the Museum, knowing and understanding the achievements of Seurat was an essential precondition for comprehending the developments of the twentieth century.

Seurat's art has continued to be at once origin, foundation, and touchstone for the Museum's collection. Three important works, a painting and two drawings, came into the collection in 1934 as part of the Lillie P. Bliss collection, and over the years MoMA has been the fortunate beneficiary of extraordinarily generous collectors—including the Levy, Burden, Whitney, Rockefeller, and Smith families—who entrusted their works to this expanding Seurat collection. The Museum reaffirmed its commitment to the artist in 1958 with a full-scale retrospective, organized with The Art Institute of Chicago. Today, visitors to the Museum's painting and sculpture galleries are greeted by four of Seurat's most magnificent seascapes, and these canvases, along with those by Cézanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh, continue to offer a tutorial on the roots of MoMA's collection as well as the unfolding of modernism more generally.

*Georges Seurat: The Drawings* is another vital chapter in MoMA's history with this artist. Looking at the simplified forms, structural clarity, and manipulation of darkness and illumination in these drawings, it is clear why Seurat's work is often seen as a forerunner of twentieth-century abstraction. Because of limitations on their exposure—such restrictions are true of all light-sensitive works on paper—this

exhibition offers a rare opportunity to closely study these drawings in person, to see the ways in which these works, impossibly dark and luminous at the same time, transformed the nature of drawing. Given the importance of drawing to today's artists, it is a particularly opportune time to reexamine one of the greatest draughtsmen of the nineteenth century.

A project of this scale and complexity can only be realized with the advice, cooperation, and generosity of individuals near and far. We are especially grateful for the confidence so many private collectors have shown us by lending their extraordinary works to the exhibition. Many institutions have made similar sacrifices, and we are indebted to their directors, curators, and conservators for making these loans possible. We thank all those who have assisted us with their particular expertise, and we are delighted that such eminent writers have shared their ideas about Seurat and his drawings here. Many members of the Museum's staff have contributed to this project in significant ways; the exhibition, installation, and publication could not have been completed without their creativity, professionalism, and enthusiasm. Above all, Jodi Hauptman, Associate Curator, has done an outstanding job in organizing the exhibition and overseeing this publication. Her scholarship and discerning judgment are models of curatorial prowess.

Finally, to make such significant works available to the public entails considerable costs. We are deeply grateful to The Starr Foundation, the Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Charitable Trust, the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities, Susan G. Jacoby, The Norman and Rosita Winston Foundation, and Cultural Services, Embassy of France in the United States, who recognized the importance of this project and have generously supported the exhibition and this publication.

—Glenn D. Lowry  
Director, The Museum of Modern Art



# INTRODUCTION

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Jodi Hauptman

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## The Right Path

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Georges Seurat's first publicly exhibited work was a drawing. One of the great portraits of the nineteenth century, *Aman-Jean* (pl. 34) is a fairly large, beautifully finished presentation drawing—the artist used a full sheet of paper, a size he would ordinarily slice up into four sections—that was accepted to the Salon of 1883. It was, critic Claude Roger-Marx wrote in Seurat's first notice, "a meritorious drawing that cannot be the work of a newcomer."<sup>1</sup> Seurat connected his subject with a long history of depictions of painters at work—indeed, art historian Robert Herbert believes that "when he embarked on this portrait, Seurat must have had public exhibition in mind, so he chose a composition that would make evident his link with tradition," especially in the pose that recalls portraits by Hans Holbein and the classical triangular format.<sup>2</sup> In addition to devices meant to locate this work firmly in art history, we can also see the formal innovations that Seurat had already developed and would continue to refine: the massing of tones to shape and form, the deployment of particular media to create velvety blackness and glowing luminosity, an evocative softness and mood. *Aman-Jean* himself well understood the importance of this work—calling it "*very, very beautiful*"—and of the practice of drawing to the artist's success: "It is drawing, thoroughly understood, that put Seurat on the right path."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Roger-Marx, quoted in Robert L. Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859–1891* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859–1891*, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> *Aman-Jean*, letters to Gustave Coquirot, published in Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859–1891*, Appendix B, pp. 377 (emphasis original), 376.



How did drawing put Seurat on the “right path”? What is the nature of his journey? What did drawing mean for the artist? Despite his tragically short career—he died at the age of thirty-one—and the lack of letters, diaries, archives, and photographs and his own famed reserve, we can still learn something of the importance of drawing for the artist from accounts of friends, colleagues, and critics, and from his own extensive output. Gustave Kahn, for example, described Seurat as “a young man crazy about drawing,” and noted that when he became discouraged, “he took refuge in pure drawing.”<sup>4</sup> Ernst Laurent remembers drawing by candlelight with his fellow artist.<sup>5</sup> The highest praise came from Paul Signac, who called his works “the most beautiful painter’s drawings in existence.”<sup>6</sup> The catalogue raisonné inventories five hundred works on paper (with about 270 dating from his maturity), an extraordinary number for a career that lasted only about eleven years.<sup>7</sup> Some of these are preparations for his renowned monumental canvases, like *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte* (p. 111, fig. 3) and *Une Baignade, Asnières* (p. 187, fig. 1), but most are independent drawings, works created on their own and not as studies for larger projects, proving that drawing in and of itself was an important activity for the artist.

Born in 1859 into a Parisian bourgeois family—his father was a bailiff who had made a substantial income from real estate speculation—Seurat began drawing as a boy, embarking on his formal training in a small neighborhood art school run by Justin Lequien. When he was eighteen, he entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under the instruction of Henri Lehmann, an Ingres devotee and defender of the classical tradition.<sup>8</sup> As a student he made numerous drawings from antique sculpture and live models, as well as copies of the masterworks of such artists as Ingres, Raphael, and Poussin. Though competent, these drawings show little evidence of Seurat’s subsequent development.

This development was facilitated by a shift away from his Beaux-Arts instruction, a move made possible in part by his military service in Brest (1879–80), a town in northwestern France. There, without models and antique casts, Seurat began to sketch what was readily accessible: his fellow recruits at rest, his own hands. In addition, four extant sketchbooks (pls. 13–16), dating from about 1877–81, show Seurat out and about in parks and plazas, making quick drawings of people on benches, city wanderers, and architectural details. In the unfolding of Seurat’s career, these sketches function as a hinge between his academic training and his mature style: the attention to the everyday, the use of cross-hatching not for modeling but for rendering light on a surface, line that seems to have an agency of its own instead of functioning as descriptive contour. Seurat began to exploit all of these techniques in different ways—an attempt, he would later tell the writer Emile Verhaeren, to counteract “efforts soured by routine and outmoded practices,” “to [find] himself, personally...the way one discovers unknown stones beneath stratifications of land and soil.”<sup>9</sup>

4 Gustave Kahn, *Les Dessins de Georges Seurat, 1859–1891*, vol. 1 (Paris: Bernheim-Jeune, 1928), n.p.; and Gustave Kahn, “Seurat,” translated and excerpted in Alain Madeleine-Pedrillat, *Seurat* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 206. Originally published in *L’Art moderne* (April 5, 1891).

5 See John Leighton and Richard Thomson, *Seurat and The Bathers* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1997), p. 27.

6 Paul Signac, *D’Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionisme*, 4th ed. (Paris: Librairie Floury, 1939), p. 81.

7 César M. de Hauke, *Seurat et son œuvre*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gründ, 1961). Subsequent references throughout this volume to works found in this publication will be listed as a number following the letter H.

8 For an extensive discussion of Seurat’s early years and the specifics of his artistic training, see Richard Thomson, *Seurat* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985).

9 Emile Verhaeren, quoted in Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859–1891*, p. 13. Originally published as Emile Verhaeren, “Georges Seurat,” *La Société nouvelle* 7, no. 1 (1891): 429–38.

This very physical metaphor—of excavation and archaeology—seems completely at odds with the optical qualities so often emphasized in discussions of Seurat's work: the famous dots (what came to be known as Pointillism), the *mélange optique* (the mixing of color in the eye instead of the palette), and his engagement with the color theories of Michel-Eugène Chevreul and Odgen Rood and the perceptual ideas of Charles Blanc, Humbert de Superville, and Charles Henry, including expression through line and linear direction.<sup>10</sup> However, Verhaeren's language (or perhaps it was Seurat's own?) is strikingly accurate for his works on paper, which derive their power from materials and materiality. It is not surprising that a fellow artist, Charles Angrand, was able to see beyond this fixation on vision and opticality, noticing instead Seurat's close attention to tactility, to the "material substance" of his work.<sup>11</sup>

In focusing on what Seurat excavated, in beginning to find the character and texture of his path, it is imperative that we foreground this "material substance." Very early on, Seurat brought together two materials: Michallet paper and conté crayon. Medium is typically defined as a specific pigment or mark-making tool, like oil paint, pastel, or graphite. For Seurat, however, medium is pigment *and* support, conté and Michallet paper together. The importance of the support in this equation goes well beyond simply acknowledging it as medium. Seurat exploited the texture of this particular paper. Abandoning the contour line of his training, the artist stroked the conté crayon across the sheet's ridges, thus devising his own kind of draughtsmanship: the emphasis on dark and light tones to abstract and simplify figures; the layering of pigment to create a range of densities, from a translucent scrim to impenetrable darkness; the exploitation of reserve to amplify radiating light; the interlacing of lines to complicate space; the impossibly accurate description of subjects using the barest of means. Though Seurat's methodical bent has been repeated to the point of caricature, Verhaeren emphasizes his imaginative side, calling him "technician, risk-taker, inventor."<sup>12</sup>

Seurat's exploitation of this paper support extended to his work in other media where he pays similarly close attention to the ground. The artist took advantage of the grain and texture of his wood panel and the weave of his canvas in much the same way he used the chain and laid lines of Michallet paper, employing a dry brush to skip over hills and valleys created by wood grain or cross-graining (in the case of the panels) or coarse threads or even a textured priming (in the case of the canvases). The ground often becomes a crucial part of the composition, whether describing subject matter or enhancing the sense of pure painterly surface, while the painted skips cause an optical flicker that functions as moving water or glittering light.

Whether gentle or aggressive, whether on paper, panel, or canvas, resistance—the act of *working against*—is both a method and an attitude. Its importance is articulated by Seurat in his only surviving artistic statement. Though he begins his text by declaring "Art is Harmony," he goes on to argue that this can only be

10 See Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859–1891*, Appendixes G, H, J, K, and L, pp. 384–93; Robert L. Herbert, "Parade de cirque and the Scientific Aesthetic of Charles Henry," in Herbert, *Seurat: Drawings and Paintings* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 136–53; Michael F. Zimmermann, *Seurat and the Art Theory of His Time* (Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1991).

11 Charles Angrand, letter to Henri-Edmond Cross (after 1891), quoted in Robert Rey, *La Renaissance du sentiment classique: La Peinture française à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Les Beaux-Arts, 1921), p. 95.

12 Emile Verhaeren, quoted in Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859–1891*, p. 6. Originally published as Emile Verhaeren, "Chronique artistique: Les XX," *La Société nouvelle* 7 (1891): 248–54. Seurat has often been understood as an artist far too dependent on theoretical ideas about color or composition, resulting in a persona and an oeuvre that is scientific, analytic, and cold.

Recent scholarship, however, has shown that he was less reliant on scientific treatises than previously thought. It is more productive, in fact, to see him not as a slave to theory but as an artist able to harness ideas from his readings in optics or color for his own ends. See the overview of Seurat and science in Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859–1891*, pp. 4–6.



achieved through pictorial friction. In the section titled “Technique,” Seurat explains, “The means of expression is the optical mixture of tones, of tints, that is, of the lights and of their reactions (shadows), following the laws of *contrast*, of gradation, of irradiation.”<sup>13</sup> In putting one material against another, in creating a state of friction or resistance, Seurat sets up an art based on contrast. Such contrast goes beyond the way materials are used to encompass, most importantly, “lights” and “their reactions (shadows).” Seurat’s exploration of darkness and radiance—the way he uses the paper’s reserve to emphasize luminosity and layers *conté* to present dense obscurity—is one of his greatest achievements. Though many artists of the period were concerned with the investigation of shadow—think of Jean-François Millet and Odilon Redon, whose works Seurat certainly knew, Henri Fantin-Latour, and especially the *fusainistes*, who adopted charcoal as their primary medium—Seurat’s dramatization of the relationship between light and shadow, an enlivening of luminosity and intensification of darkness that he referred to as “irradiation,” resulted in a distinct body of work on paper. Seurat’s irradiation—the placement of dark next to light in a relationship of “mutual exaltation”—generates a soft halo or glow around his figures.<sup>14</sup> Bathed in a light that shimmers around them (bare paper set off against dense pigment), nurses, street sweepers, elegant ladies, and a host of others emerge out of a mysterious, unreadable darkness.

Harnessing lessons learned from irradiation, Seurat puts into play a number of other contrasting relationships: substance and evanescence in drawings of figures and their blurred doubles and shadows (look, for example, at the almost disappearing specters and their substantial partners in *Night Stroll* [pl. 60]); resolution and ambiguity where the image alternates between a picture and a screen or scrim of textured marks; three-dimensionality and flatness, especially in his landscapes in which houses, trees, and brush alternate between a three-dimensional presence and an almost theatrical flatness; classicism and modernity in starkly composed scenes of the city’s “monuments” and types (think of the bridges, trains, and boats and the straight-back merchants and artists); and figuration and abstraction, in which figures and structures appear to be made of geometric, almost sculptural forms. In these last works, Seurat is closer to Brancusi than to his fellow Neo-Impressionists (consider, for example, his mother’s head in *Embroidery [The Artist’s Mother]* [pl. 36], with its perfectly straight part).

Though most of Seurat’s drawings function independently, with subjects drawn from urban and rural life—modish women and city workers, modern transport and horse-drawn carts, Parisian suburbs and pastoral landscapes—his exploration of light and shadow, abstraction and figuration, substance and evanescence, certainly impacted his work in color. For example, a parallel use of irradiation can be found in Seurat’s paintings of isolated figures. In these we can see the relationship between the artist’s tonal drawing and his particular use of color. Lessons learned from *conté*

13 Georges Seurat, letter to Maurice Beaubourg (never sent), August 28, 1890 (emphasis original). Translated and reprinted in Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859–1891*, Appendix E, p. 382. This letter is reproduced on pp. 270–72 in this volume.

14 Herbert explains that in irradiation “light and dark tones mutually exalt each other as they come together.”

Robert L. Herbert, *Seurat’s Drawings* (New York: Shorewood Publishers, 1962), p. 56.

15 Herbert, *Seurat’s Drawings*, p. 86.

16 Written by Seurat in the margin of a letter to Paul Signac, August 26, 1888, in Henri Dorra and John Rewald, *Seurat: L’Œuvre peint, biographie, et catalogue critique* (Paris: Les Beaux-Arts, 1959), p. lxxv.

17 Charles Angrand, quoted in Gustave Coquiot, *Georges Seurat* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1924), p. 43; Camille Pissarro, letter to Paul Signac, February 24, 1888, in *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, ed. Janine Bailly-Herzberg, vol. 2 (Paris: Valhermeil, 1986), p. 218; Emile Verhaeren, quoted in John Rewald, *Georges Seurat* (New York: Wittenborn and Co., 1946),

p. 48; Paul Alexis, quoted in Rewald, *Georges Seurat*, p. 34.

18 Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 6.

crayon helped him hone the figures and landscapes of his monumental paintings: Seurat moved back and forth between his drawings, oil sketches, and canvases, refining positions, shapes, modeling, and lighting.

### The Aesthetics of Silence

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It is clear that the striking characteristics of Seurat's drawings—the dramatic play of light and dark, subjects that simultaneously coalesce and dissipate, the tension between a gridded scrim and a picture—emerge from the relationship, the resistance, between paper and *conté*. While we derive enormous visual pleasure from the material presence of these drawings, how we read their subject matter and meaning depends almost entirely on absence. In contrast to Seurat's most famous paintings, with their depictions of groups of people in the heat of the day, in the dim glow of gaslight, or under a circus tent, his drawings present empty places and lone figures. Pointing out that they are “moody to the point of melancholy,” Herbert surmised that Seurat “must have haunted Paris and its suburbs at dusk, in the early dawn, and at times of rain,” observing the city at its most still and bleak.<sup>15</sup> The notion of the artist wandering during the quietest parts of the day is fitting given his well-known reticence, his tendency to withdraw. In describing himself to his fellow artist Paul Signac, Seurat admitted, “I do not speak a great deal.”<sup>16</sup> The accuracy of this self-assessment is supported by comments made by colleagues and critics. Angrand noticed that Seurat only spoke when questioned directly; Camille Pissarro referred to him as “mute”; Verhaeren wrote of his “unspoken pride”; and Paul Alexis once mentioned “the silence of Seurat.”<sup>17</sup>

In looking at Seurat's drawings, such muteness and reserve is far more than an idiosyncrasy of personality: Seurat's silence is, in fact, an aesthetic. These drawings are suffused with quiet. In his landscapes and city views, fields and streets are largely empty. Subjects of portraits—think of those of Seurat's mother and father—are completely absorbed in solitary activities like reading or embroidery. Other more anonymous subjects are similarly self-involved—in work, reverie, or sleep. Practically all of his isolated figures turn their back on the viewer (it is hard to imagine another oeuvre filled so completely with human backs) or hide their heads. When a face is shown at all, it is often in profile or partially obscured and only the barest of facial details are provided. Without a face or a front, these figures cannot speak; lacking expression or gesture, they are distilled to pure form. Not simply quiet, these drawings are aggressively silent. To make use of an anachronism, it is as if a mute button has been pushed on, evacuating all sound. No matter how hard we look, no matter how evocative of person or place, we cannot hear the turning of a cart's wheels, rain on the trees or sidewalk, the snap of an umbrella, the call of a merchant, the swish of a broom, the turning of a novel's pages.

About seventy-five years after Seurat's death, Susan Sontag laid out the terms of an aesthetic of silence. For Sontag, silence is a form of speech, a rhetoric that in its difficulty, its “reluctance to communicate,” its refusal of the world, actually offers a kind of liberation, a heady nourishment, an opening for new ideas and new experiences.<sup>18</sup> Though Sontag addresses a very particular moment and very specific artists (John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Samuel Beckett, and Ingmar Bergman, among other twentieth-century modernists) and art-making, many of her arguments lead us back to Seurat. Silence, Sontag tells us, can only be understood relatively: “The artist