

Special Issue "New Directions in Neo-Impressionism"

Introduction

Tania Woloshyn and Anne Dymond

[1] The last few years have witnessed significant moments in the history and scholarship of neo-impressionism: new publications, such as Robyn Roslak's *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Ashgate, 2007) and the edited volume, *Seurat Re-viewed* (ed. Paul Smith, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), have questioned neo-impressionism's politics and its paternity, respectively; new large-scale exhibitions, including "Neo-Impressionism from Seurat to Paul Klee" (Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2005), a retrospective on Théo van Rysselberghe (1862-1926) (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels and the Gementemuseum, The Hague, 2006), a retrospective on Maximilien Luce (1858-1941) (Musée des Impressionnismes, Giverny, 2010), and "Cross, from Neo-Impressionism to Fauvism" (Musée Marmottan, Paris, 2011-2012), have brought renewed focus on neo-impressionist artists; and milestones contributing to that history, with 2010 marking the centenary of the death of Henri-Edmond Cross (1856-1910) and 2011 witnessing the unfortunate passing of Françoise Cachin, the former director of the Musée d'Orsay, the granddaughter of Paul Signac (1863-1935), and the foremost authority on his work.

[2] It is therefore a fitting time to reconsider the artistic production and contextual themes around neo-impressionism, a much maligned movement that has often been described as a series of artistic, political and scientific failures. Its new direction after the death of Georges Seurat (1859-1891) in 1891, under the self-declared leadership of Signac, has been posited less as a renewal towards alternative but equally radical luminous experiments than a progressive degeneration from its original – that is, Seurat's – conception. Seurat as progenitor, as the "father" of neo-impressionism, in the presiding narrative of the movement has meant that art-historical literature has overwhelmingly privileged Seurat's oeuvre to "explain" neo-impressionism, not least its technique – the *point* (pointillism) or divided facture (divisionism). While Seurat's production is indisputably key to the history of neo-impressionism, critically analyzing the movement *beyond* the celebrity of Seurat – its developments after the artist's untimely early death in 1891, its diverse practitioners (most of whom remain "minor" artists), and the origins of that very narrative – opens up fresh interpretations with new insights and significant new research. The time is ripe for a reappraisal of this movement.

[3] Together, the papers within this Special Issue reveal how the intense focus on the early years of the movement has occluded many facets of its later developments. The authors bring to light how multi-faceted and multivalent the movement always was. They explore, collectively and individually, how neo-impressionism defied seemingly fixed

categories, and how attempts to define and limit it were continually being tested, both during Seurat's lifetime and after.

[4] [Michelle Foa's article](#) explores the paradigmatic nature of biography as an interpretive strategy and the possibilities for its resistance, focusing on Seurat. She examines critics' persistent need for palpable authorial presence and the resultant anxiety around the supposed depersonalization of artistic production in neo-impressionism for critics of all stripes in the nineteenth century. Indeed, she convincingly argues that the desire to map Seurat's pictures onto his life drove critics' perceptions that his life was devoid of incident, as regular as his brushmarks. But she reveals that biography and anti-biography were always complicated; Seurat was deeply conflicted about the issue, claiming both paternity of the style and yet repeatedly resisting the biographical and its links to the subjective and the personal. Above all, Foa's article prompts us to recognize how important the celebrity status of Seurat's paternity was and continues to be.

[5] Such concerns are taken up in a different way in [Marnin Young's article](#), which closely examines responses, both critical and painted, to the death of Seurat. In 1891, neo-impressionism seemed to occupy two diametrically-opposed positions in the interpretive field: both scientific and thus objective, yet also symbolic. He persuasively argues that, in the aftermath of Seurat's death, critics subsumed neo-impressionism into symbolism, with even the pseudo-science of Charles Henry being understood as idealist. Young explores the responses of Signac and others, giving a nuanced account of the critical posturing and positioning of the early 1890s. Young and Foa both reveal how fraught interpretation was for the movement's practitioners: for all its supposed theory, the central terms in which neo-impressionism might be understood were fluid and slippery.

[6] [Katherine Brion](#) equally considers how neo-impressionists elided dichotomies in the 1890s, focusing on that between theoretical propaganda and "propaganda of the deed" within anarchist theory. She argues that Signac sought to transcend this division between theory and action in his painting, as she re-reads his paintings as non-verbal acts that would use both reason and emotion to create an enduring aesthetic and social harmony.

[7] [Tania Woloshyn](#) too nuances our understanding of the deep connections between neo-impressionism and the anarchist movement, as she reads the Mediterranean works of Cross, Signac and Van Rysselberghe through the anarcho-communist traditions which understood the Maures region as a "free land," conducive to the desired harmonious future. She too tackles the ongoing interpretive debates, here between site-specificity and imagination, inflected through the medical, geographical, and political literature of the day. Through her examination of Jean Grave's 1908 novel *Terre Libre: Les Pionniers* (1908), she convincingly situates the imagined anarchist ideal of the neo-impressionists

in a landscape perceived not as "utopian," but rather as a tropical-French Mediterranean hybrid set in the sunny Maures.

[8] Like Woloshyn and Brion, [Anne Dymond](#) contributes new insight into later neo-impressionism. Her examination of Parisian art criticism in the late 1890s and early 1900s challenges standard explanations of the resurgence of interest in neo-impressionism in the early twentieth century. This resurgence is often interpreted as a delayed reaction to Signac's 1898 text, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme*; however Dymond's essay attributes the surge in interest to the group members' positioning as leaders of the renewed *Salon des Indépendants*, where Signac's proposal for the decoration of the Mairie d'Asnières was highly esteemed for its decorative potential, in 1901.

[9] [Claire Maingon's article](#) also expands the standard focus of scholarship, by considering the impact of Claude Monet on neo-impressionism both before and after Seurat's death. Maingon reframes our understanding of series painting, important for Seurat, Monet and Signac, which in all cases moved beyond the realist/symbolist divide, and her essay reveals that the lines of influence moved both ways. Like the other papers in the volume, her analysis of the fertile connections between artists – in this case, between Monet and Seurat, Charles Angrand (1854-1926) and especially Signac – reveals how limited the categories of analysis have been.

[10] [Fae Brauer's piece](#) brings these considerations into the wider sphere of artists working alongside the neo-impressionists, as she considers the impact of compulsory military service on the art, artists and political action in the period. Her essay brings to light much new information about military service in creating a masculinized environment that was contested by artists such as Luce and "Le Douanier" Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), adding another component to our understanding of the depth of the neo-impressionist commitment to political action.

[11] This Special Issue, "New Directions in Neo-Impressionism," is the product of three fruitful years of discussions and collaborations, stretching back to 2009 when Woloshyn began planning a conference on new, exciting scholarship on neo-impressionism. Initial talks between Woloshyn, Professors Robert Wallis and Anthea Callen led to the organization of the conference, of the same title, in November 2010. This international, bilingual conference brought together emerging and established scholars of neo-impressionism to the heart of London, at Richmond, the American International University in London. The speakers, many of whom have contributed important articles to this Special Issue, included Richard Shiff, Françoise Baligand, Jane Block, Michelle Foa, Marnin Young, Katherine Brion, Monique Nonne, Claire Maingon, Karen Stock and Anne Dymond. It was Dymond who, in 2011, proposed publication of those conference papers as a Special Issue. The enthusiasm, encouragement and expertise of RIHA Journal's main

editor, Regina Wenninger (ZI, Munich), and her colleague Anne-Laure Brisac-Chraïbi (INHA, Paris) have made our publication possible, and we would like to express our thanks to the RIHA Journal team and the peer reviewers for their input and support. We are also honored that this is the first Special Issue of RIHA Journal and, like the editors, we feel strongly that Open Access is a vital tool for the academic dissemination of art history and visual culture. Indeed, because so many neo-impressionist works, both images and archival documents, remain within private collections, an open, international forum is the only way to make neo-impressionism, quite simply, *accessible* – both in its sense of being available and of being comprehensible – to future scholars of this field. We need *more* access, more collaboration and more international interaction to further research on neo-impressionism. RIHA fosters such beliefs, and the following Special Issue is a humble project towards this goal – the first, we hope, of many.

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