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(Anti-)Biography and Neo-Impressionism*

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Abstract

This article analyzes neo-impressionism in relation to the biographical model of art criticism and art history that became increasingly prevalent in France over the course of the 19th century. Examining the critical response to the neo-impressionists, as well as some of their pictures and writings, I argue for the centrality of questions of authorship, individuality, and subjectivity to the group and its reception. I identify a distinctly anti-biographical tendency in the movement, one that disquieted the critics and led them to try and re-inscribe biographical meaning back into the work of Georges Seurat. Indeed, though Seurat instituted a divide between his work and his life in a variety of ways, he also insisted throughout his career on his paternity over the neo-impressionist method. In all of these ways, the relationship between the self and art was a significant and problematic issue for the neo-impressionists and the critics around them.

Contents

Introduction

A "Patient Spotted Tapestry". Neo-Impressionism and the Question of Subjectivity

The Art and the Man: Re-Writing the Biography of Seurat

Seurat, Anti-Biography and Authorship

Introduction

[1] Though the origins of biographical art history long precede the 19th century, it was during this period that the practice of interpreting art through the lens of the artist's life began to gain particular prominence. Increasingly over the course of the century, the significance of art was seen to lie, at least in part, in its status as the product of a particular maker. As such, the issue of the relationship between the self and art was a pressing one for some of the century's key artists and critics. It is in this context that I want to analyze neo-impressionism, looking closely at some of their writings (and a few of their pictures), as well as critical responses to their work, in order to shed light on the significance of questions of authorship and biography to the group and its reception. In this article, I will analyze the critics' discomfort with the perceived displacement of individual authorship in neo-impressionism, as well as their attempts to repair the supposed breach between art and life in the case of Georges Seurat (1859-1891). I will also address Seurat's persistent ambivalence about the relationship between individuality and artistic production, analyzing the ways that he distanced himself from his work in both his pictures and writings while at the same time remaining deeply concerned about his paternity over the neo-impressionist method of painting. Ultimately, I will posit neo-impressionism as an alternative to the biographical model of art that was so prevalent in

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the late 19th century, but an alternative that was subject to significant discussion and debate by the individual neo-impressionists and by many of the critics responding to their work.

[<top>](#)

A "Patient Spotted Tapestry". Neo-Impressionism and the Question of Subjectivity

- [2] "His huge painting, *The Grande Jatte*, in whatever part one examines it, spreads out, a monotonous and patient spotted tapestry: here, in effect, the painter's hand is useless, trickery is impossible; there is no place for bravura; – let the hand be numb, but let the eye be agile, perceptive, and knowing." So wrote the most important critic of neo-impressionism, Félix Fénéon, about Seurat's *Un dimanche à la Grande Jatte – 1884 (A Sunday on the Grande Jatte – 1884)*, 1884-1886 (Fig. 1) in a lengthy essay published in June of 1886.¹ This text constituted Fénéon's first sustained statement on neo-impressionism and it would set many of the terms in which critics and art historians would understand the group's work.



1 Georges Seurat, *Un dimanche à la Grande Jatte – 1884 (A Sunday on the Grande Jatte – 1884)*, 1884-1886, oil on canvas, 207.5 x 308.1 cm. Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago (source: The Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georges_Seurat_031.jpg)

- [3] While the section of the essay cited here is one of the most widely quoted passages about Seurat's iconic painting, the implications of Fénéon's characterization of the *Grande Jatte* as a "patient spotted tapestry" has not been fully considered. In fact, this

¹ "Son immense tableau la *Grande-Jatte*, en quelque partie qu'on l'examine, s'étale monotone et patiente tiqueture, tapisserie: ici, en effet, la patte est inutile, le truquage impossible; nulle place pour les morceaux de bravoure; – que la main soit gourde, mais que l'oeil soit agile, perspicace et savant." Félix Fénéon, "Les Impressionnistes," in: *La Vogue* (13-20 June 1886), 261-275, here 272. This essay was reprinted, with minor modifications, as part of a longer pamphlet by Fénéon entitled *Les Impressionnistes en 1886*, Paris 1886. – Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

was just one of many instances in which critics compared neo-impressionist paintings to various embroidered, sewn, or woven decorative surfaces. For example, Charles Frémine, writing in *Le Rappel* in 1887, claimed that "the impressionists no longer paint, they decorate. Look at Signac, Angrand, Cavallo-Peduzzi (a new one), Seurat, Lucien Pissaro [sic], etc. [...] What patience to end up with these inlays! And what precious models of tapestry for a boarding school of young girls!"² Another critic wrote in 1888 that "their canvases have the appearance of tapestries *au petit point* produced in sewing circles in the most remote provinces by young women possessing the most elementary aesthetic."³ A third writer, Paul Bluysen, characterized neo-impressionist painting in similar terms when he claimed, in an 1890 review, that it "has the appearance of a tapestry made by a patient and ignorant housewife."⁴

[4] The association of neo-impressionist painting with feminine craft was no doubt intended by some critics to serve as a general disparagement of the group's work. But these comments also reflect a consistent concern on the critics' part about the depersonalization and de-authoring of artistic production in neo-impressionism. Indeed, the ostensible uniformity of the pointillist marks on the canvas, combined with the fact that the same style of painting was supposedly shared by the various members of the group, led many critics to lament an absence of individuality in their work. The critic Jules Desclozeaux, for example, after praising certain aspects of their paintings, nevertheless concluded that "all of these canvases, not very independent, [are] composed according to a rather narrow ritual in a manner that is too uniform and too impersonal in general."⁵ Likewise, another critic complained, "What do we say about Albert, Signac, Dubois-Pillet? All of these artists follow one another and resemble one other, hélas!"⁶ "Pass through their entire room," wrote Alfred Paulet in an 1888 review of the *Salon des Indépendants*, "and you will see the uniformity of manner. Here are painters of whom not one, perhaps, has the same way of feeling as another, and nevertheless their work always has the same

² "Les impressionnistes [sic] ne peignent plus, ils tapissent. Voyez MM. Signac, Angrand, Cavallo-Peduzzi (un nouveau), Seurat, Lucien Pissaro [sic], etc. [...] Quelle patience pour en arriver à cette marqueterie! Et quels précieux modèles de tapisserie pour un pensionnat de jeunes filles!" Charles Frémine, "Exposition des Artistes Indépendants," in: *Le Rappel* (27 March 1887), unpaginated.

³ "Leurs toiles [ont] l'aspect des tapisseries *au petit point* fabriquées dans les ouvroirs des provinces les plus reculées par des jeunes filles de l'esthétique la plus élémentaire." Charley, "Exposition des Indépendants," in: *Le Télégraphe* (23 March 1888), 3.

⁴ "[...] a l'aspect d'une tapisserie faite par une patiente et ignorante ménagère." Paul Bluysen, "Au jour le jour: L'exposition des 'Artistes indépendants,'" in: *La République française* (21 March 1890), 2-3, here 3.

⁵ "Tous ces tableaux, peu indépendants, composés selon un rite assez étroit, dans une manière trop uniforme, trop impersonnelle en général." Jules Desclozeaux, "L'Exposition des artistes indépendants," in: *L'Estafette* (25 August 1886), 2.

⁶ "Que dirons-nous de MM. Albert, Signac, Dubois, Pillet [sic]? Tous ces peintres se suivent, et se ressemblent, hélas!" Langely, "Exposition des Artistes Indépendants," in: *Paris-Moderne* (23 September 1886), 6.

appearance."⁷ Another critic put forward a very similar understanding of pointillism when he defined it as "the eternal dish of lentils, multicolored and mathematically contrasted, for which they would sacrifice their rights of inheritance."⁸ According to these critics, then, the pointillist mode of painting entailed the sacrifice of the unique artistic mark, resulting in the expulsion of subjectivity from the work. Indeed, it is in precisely these terms that George Moore described his first experience seeing an exhibition of neo-impressionist paintings in his 1893 book, *Modern Painting*:

The pictures were hung low, so I went down on my knees and examined the dotting in the pictures signed Seurat, and the dotting in those that were signed Pissarro. After a strict examination I was able to detect some differences, and I began to recognize the well-known touch even through this most wild and most wonderful transformation. Yes, owing to a long and intimate acquaintance with Pissarro and his work, I could distinguish between him and Seurat, but to the ordinary visitor their pictures were identical.⁹

[5] And Camille Pissarro himself explained his eventual abandonment of the neo-impressionist technique in the mid-1890s as an attempt, in part, to reinvest his work with individuality. Writing to Henry van de Velde in 1896, Pissarro stated that, "Having found out after many attempts [...] that it was impossible to give an individual character to my drawing, I had to give it up."¹⁰ In sum, a disconcerting divide was seen by many to have opened up in neo-impressionism between the work and the artist, between the picture and the self that produced it. The neo-impressionists' ostensible depersonalization of artistic style, and thus the de-coupling of the final work from the hand – and the self – of an individual artist, ran directly counter to the biographical mode of art criticism that had become increasingly prevalent over the course of the 19th century.¹¹

⁷ "Parcourez toute leur salle et vous verrez l'uniformité de la manière. Voilà des peintres dont pas un, peut-être, n'a la même façon de sentir que l'autre, et pourtant leur oeuvre a toujours même apparence." Alfred Paulet, "La Vie Artistique," in: *Le National* (27 March 1888), unpaginated. One critic summarized this view of neo-impressionism when he wrote: "There is, if I understand correctly, a reproach of the neo-impressionist school [...]. By the rather mechanical side of their procedures, they tend to suppress all originality on the part of the artist, or rather originality is here something totally superfluous and cumbersome. Nothing, as they say, resembles Seurat more than Signac, or resembles Signac more than Dubois-Pillet." ("On fait, si j'entends bien, un autre reproche à l'école néo-impressionniste [...]. Ce second argument consiste à dire que, par le côté en quelque sorte mécanique de ses procédés, elle conduit à supprimer toute originalité chez l'artiste, ou plutôt que l'originalité est ici quelque chose de tout à fait superflu et encombrant. Rien, dit-on, ne ressemble davantage à M. Seurat que M. Signac, à M. Signac que M. Dubois-Pillet.") "Le Néo-Impressionnisme," in: *L'Art moderne* (10 March 1888), 83-85, here 84.

⁸ "[...] le déjà sempiternel plat de lentilles multicolores et mathématiquement contrastées, pour lequel ils sacrifieraient leurs droits d'aïnesse." Henry Somm, "Exposition des Artistes Indépendants," in: *Le Chat noir* (7 April 1888), 1098.

⁹ George Moore, *Modern Painting* London 1893, 89.

¹⁰ Quoted in John Alsberg, *Modern Art and Its Enigma*, London 1983, 129.

¹¹ For more on the importance of biography in 19th-century French art criticism and art history, see Greg Thomas, "Instituting Genius: The Formation of Biographical Art History in France," in: *Art History and Its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield, London and New York 2002, 260-270. See also Nicholas Green, "Art History and the Construction of Individuality," in: *Oxford Art Journal* 6.2 (1983), 80-82. Griselda Pollock offers an extended analysis of the intricate connection between biography/psycho-biography and art history, with Van Gogh as her

- [6] The potency of this particular criticism of neo-impressionism is evident not only in the frequency with which it was leveled against their work, but also in the fact that supportive critics continually felt the need to rebut it in their writings. Charles Saunier, in a review in *L'Art moderne*, wrote in 1892:

One has often reproached the partisans of the division of tone for a mechanical technique that must annihilate their personality. An unjust reproach, refuted already many times and particularly by the current exhibition. On the contrary, each artist clearly shows there his temperament, his special vision: this one is the most blond, that one the most luminous, this other one, more robust. Thus no confusion would be permitted.¹²

- [7] Fénéon, too, in his key writings on neo-impressionism, made a point of repeatedly contesting this particular line of attack against the group. For example, in his September 1886 essay "L'Impressionnisme aux Tuileries," he wrote:

Against the reforms promulgated by the three or four painters that these notes concern, arguments flow, harmless. 'The uniformity, the impersonality of the material execution will deprive their paintings of any distinctive appearance.' This is to confuse the calligraphy with the style. They are different from one another, these paintings, because the temperaments of the artists are different.¹³

- [8] The following year, Fénéon published another essay in which he again addressed the issue: "That this uniform execution [...] leaves intact the originality of the artist, even serves it, is it even necessary to mention? In fact, to confuse Camille Pissarro, Dubois-Pillet, Signac, Seurat... would be idiotic. Each of them imperiously emphasizes his uniqueness."¹⁴ As such, both the movements' detractors and its defenders confirmed the

paradigmatic example, in "Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History," in: *Screen* 21.3 (1980), 57-96. For a history of artist biographies from the classical period to the 20th century, see Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, New Haven 1979.

¹² "On a maintes fois reproché aux partisans de la division du ton une technique mécanique qui devait annihiler leur personnalité. Reproche injuste, infirmé déjà tant de fois et particulièrement par l'exposition actuelle. Chaque artiste, au contraire, y accuse nettement son tempérament, sa vision spéciale: celui-ci est plus blond, celui-là plus lumineux, cet autre, robust davantage. Aucune confusion ne serait donc être permise." Charles Saunier, "Exposition des peintres néo-impressionnistes à Paris," in: *L'Art moderne* (25 December 1892), 412-413, here 412.

¹³ "Contre la réforme promulguée par les trois ou quatre peintres que concernent ces notes, les arguments affluent, inoffensifs. 'L'uniformité, l'impersonnalité de l'exécution matérielle privera leurs tableaux de toute allure distinctive.' C'est confondre la calligraphie et le style. Ils différeront, ces tableaux, parce que le tempérament de leurs auteurs différerá." Félix Fénéon, "L'Impressionnisme aux Tuileries," in: *L'Art moderne* (19 September 1886), 300-302, here 302.

¹⁴ "Que cette exécution uniforme [...] laisse intacte l'originalité de l'artiste, la serve même, -- est-il besoin de le noter? En fait, confondre Camille Pissarro, Dubois-Pillet, Signac, Seurat ... [sic] serait imbécile. Chacun d'eux impérieusement accuse sa disparité." Félix Fénéon, "Le Néo-Impressionnisme," in: *L'Art moderne* (1 May 1887), 138-140, here 139. Another critic defended the neo-impressionists against this criticism by writing: "Those who claim that all pointillist paintings seem to come from the same "factory" have only to compare the very individual visions of the three artists cited." ("Ceux qui soutiennent que tous les tableaux au pointillé semblent sortir d'une même 'fabrique', n'ont qu'à comparer les visions si individuelles des trois artistes [Signac, Dubois-Pillet, and Finch] cités.") "Le Salon des XX – L'ancien et le nouvel impressionnisme," in: *L'Art moderne* (5 February 1888), 41-42, here 42. The writer and neo-impressionist supporter Paul Alexis did the same: "Under a common technique, each of the neo-impressionists maintains his own particular vision and his very distinct personality." ("Sous une commune technique, chacun des

importance of being able to detect individual authorship and temperament in the artists' work.

[<top>](#)

The Art and the Man: Re-Writing the Biography of Seurat

- [9] It was likely the pervasiveness and appeal of the biographical model of art criticism that led some critics to try and mend the perceived breach between life and work in the case of Seurat. In several accounts of the artist that appeared during his life or shortly after his death in 1891, Seurat's biography, appearance, and character were described in terms derived from his paintings, as critics worked back from the art to the man to establish a likeness between his pictures and the individual that produced them. In one anonymous article, Seurat was characterized as "physically: a simple man, proper, thoughtful, with measured and precise speech," terms that are almost identical to those used by many to describe his careful method of paint application.¹⁵ The same writer also made a point of mentioning Seurat's "implacably resolute gaze," drawing on the close association between neo-impressionist painting and theories of visual perception.¹⁶ The singling out of Seurat's gaze in terms that connect it to his style of painting is even more explicit in his obituary by Gustave Kahn, a leading symbolist poet and prominent supporter of the neo-impressionists. Kahn described Seurat as having had "very large eyes, which were extraordinarily calm during the idle moments of life, but when he was looking or painting, they narrowed, leaving visible only a *luminous point* of the pupil under blinking eyelashes," thereby explicitly tying Seurat's appearance to the artist's pointillist paint mark.¹⁷
- [10] Even more interestingly, some critics tried to repair the supposedly severed connection between the character of Seurat and his work by, somewhat paradoxically, constructing an image of the artist as devoid of interiority and particularity. In other words, so impersonal was the art of Seurat perceived to be by certain critics that his biography and personality were likewise purged of specificity.¹⁸ The anonymous article of 1890, quoted above and entitled "Types of Artists," stated the following:

néo-impressionnistes conserve sa vision particulière et sa personnalité bien distincte.") Trublott [pseudonym of Paul Alexis], "A Minuit – Les XX," in: *Le Cri du peuple* (9 February 1888), unpaginated.

¹⁵ "Au physique: l'homme simple, correct, réfléchi, à la parole mesurée et précise." "Types d'artistes," in: *L'Art moderne* (2 March 1890), 65-67, here 66.

¹⁶ "[...] un regard implacablement décidé." "Types d'artistes," 66.

¹⁷ "[...] l'oeil très grand, extraordinairement calme aux moments vagues de la vie, quand il regardait ou peignait, se rétrécissait, ne laissant voir que *le point lumineux* de la prunelle sous des cils clignants." Italics added. Gustave Kahn, "Seurat," in: *L'Art moderne* (5 April 1891), 107-110, here 107.

¹⁸ The construction of artists' biographies based on certain characteristics of their work is not new in the writings on Seurat. Vasari, for example, did the same in his discussions of particular artists in his *Vite*. See Philip Sohm, "Caravaggio's Deaths," in: *The Art Bulletin* 84 (2002), 449-468.

Since the procedures [of art], formerly instinctive, have become scientific, and the methods of investigation have been made rigorous, the technique of the arts, excluding all complicity with chance, demand assiduous labor and a constant concentration of thought, a change has been produced, quite naturally, in the personality of the artists, we mean to speak above all of French artists. The precision of the plastic expression has determined, it seems, the correcting of individuality.¹⁹

- [11] The example that the writer gave of this kind of artist was none other than Seurat. The desire to see Seurat's artistic method as reflective of his biography or personality, and thus the crafting of a biography that matched his seemingly impersonal method of painting, can be seen in several early texts about the artist. In Gustave Kahn's obituary on Seurat, for example, the writer claimed that "the biography of Georges Seurat is flat, and devoid of picturesque events."²⁰ But in fact, Seurat's personal life was much more compelling than Kahn and others would have had their readers believe. Madeleine Knoblock was an artist's model with whom Seurat began a relationship by 1889, although perhaps earlier, and with whom he fathered an illegitimate child who was born in 1890. (Indeed, Knoblock was pregnant with their second child when Seurat died the following year.)
- [12] Seurat's friends and colleagues claimed that they were unaware of the relationship until the very last days of his life. When he suddenly fell ill in late March of 1891, Seurat retreated to his mother's home with Knoblock and their infant son, thereby revealing the existence of his secret family. But in fact, there is evidence, little discussed in the literature on Seurat, indicating that his relationship with Knoblock was more widely known at the time. In 1890, a writer under the pseudonym of Victor Joze published a short novel entitled *L'Homme à femmes* (*The Ladies' Man*). Seurat not only designed its cover (Fig. 2) but also seems to have served as the model for one of the novel's main characters, "an impressionist painter of outstanding talent" by the name of Legrand.²¹ The similarities between Legrand and Seurat are numerous: both are tall and bearded, both have apartments and studios on the Boulevard de Clichy, and both are from well-off families and live off stipends. In one scene we even read of Legrand working on a painting of dancers performing a quadrille at a café-concert, which seems a clear reference to Seurat's 1889-1890 painting *Chahut* (Fig. 3).

¹⁹ "Depuis que les procédés, d'instinctifs qu'ils étaient naguère, sont devenus scientifiques, que les méthodes d'investigation se sont faites rigoureuses, que la technique des arts, excluant toute complicité du hasard, exige un labeur assidu et une constante concentration de pensée, un changement s'est produit, tout naturellement, dans la personnalité des artistes, nous entendons parler surtout des artistes français. La précision de l'expression plastique a déterminé, semble-t-il, la correction de l'individualité." "Types d'artistes," 66.

²⁰ "La biographie de Georges Seurat est plane et dépourvue de faits pittoresques." Kahn, "Seurat," 107.

²¹ Victor Joze, *La Ménagerie sociale: L'Homme à femmes*, Paris 1890. Richard Thomson was the first to argue that Seurat was the model for Legrand in *Seurat*, Oxford 1985, 212-214.



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2 Georges Seurat, Cover for Victor Joze, *L'homme à femmes*, roman parisien: la ménagerie sociale, Paris 1890 (source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Réserve des livres rares, RES P-Y2-2918, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1231617/f1>)



3 Georges Seurat, *Chahut*, 1889-1890, oil on canvas, 171.5 x 140.5 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo (source: The Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georges_Seurat_013.jpg)

- [13] Though the precise nature of the relationship between Seurat and Joze is difficult to ascertain, clearly there was enough of an acquaintanceship for Seurat both to have created the cover and to have likely served as a model for Legrand. There is one further detail of Legrand's life that links him with Seurat and that makes the novella relevant for the present discussion: the fictional painter's "mysterious amorous relations" with a woman with whom he had had a relationship for several years. It seems an unlikely coincidence that Legrand and Seurat both happened to have secret companions. Instead, I would propose that Legrand's personal life was modeled on Seurat's relationship with Knoblock and that, as such, Seurat's personal life was not in fact very much of a secret. This is not to argue for the relevance of Seurat's relationship with Knoblock, or his personal life more broadly, to his artistic production. My point is rather that the claims of Seurat's life being devoid of biographical incident were rooted less in reality than in a desire to align him with his work in order to conform to a particular biographical model of art criticism.
- [14] Another related feature of the biographical writings on Seurat was the repeated characterization of him as completely consumed by his art, to the exclusion of all else. Claiming that Seurat was wholly constituted by his work was one more way that critics vacated him of subjectivity, and thus created a likeness between him and his impersonal style of painting. The critic Jules Antoine, for example, wrote in his obituary on the artist that "his life, too short, scarcely entailed any incidents; it consisted entirely of work and experiments."²² In several instances, critics went so far as to liken Seurat to a monk or martyr figure whose artistic practice constituted a form of self-sacrifice. Alphonse Germain repeatedly described Seurat as an artist "practicing self-denial for his art with a calm faith," who was "gifted with an irresistible will, the courage of a believer, and the patience of a monk."²³ "At an age where most are starved for success," Germain wrote, "he, nobly, simply, with his calm faith, practiced self-denial for his art, embarking on the work of a Benedictine monk in order to enrich it."²⁴ Arsène Alexandre described Seurat in much the same terms when he wrote that the artist "worked with furious energy of which one has no idea, he had as it were cloistered himself in a small studio on the boulevard Clichy, living in total privation, spending his very meager subsidies exclusively for the benefit of expensive work."²⁵ These assertions of Seurat's artistic practice as a kind of

²² "Sa vie, trop courte, ne comporte guère de péripéties. Elle a tenu tout entière dans le travail et les recherches." Jules Antoine, "Georges Seurat," in: *La Revue indépendante* (April 1891), 89-93, here 89.

²³ "[...] s'abnégatisant pour son art avec une quiète foi." Kalophile l'Ermite [Alphonse Germain], "Chroniques: Les Arts, Exposition des Indépendants," in: *L'Ermitage*, 15 April 1892, 243-245, here 243; "doué d'irréfrénable volonté, d'un courage de croyant, d'une patience monacale." Alphonse Germain, "Nécrologie – Georges Seurat," in: *Moniteur des Arts* (3 April 1891), 554.

²⁴ "A un âge où la plupart sont affamés de succès, lui, noblement, simplement, avec sa quiète foi, s'est abnégatisé pour son art, entreprenant, afin de l'enrichir, un travail de bénédictin." Germain, "Nécrologie – Georges Seurat," 554.

asceticism had the effect of draining the artist of interiority and, thus, of linking him more closely with his ostensibly systematic, objective method of painting.

- [15] The analogizing of Seurat to religious figures to imbue him with a lack of subjectivity continued well after his death. Julius Meier-Graefe, for example, titled one of the sections on neo-impressionism in his *History of Modern Art*, 'The Apostle and the Congregation;' the apostle was, of course, a reference to Seurat. But Meier-Graefe did not characterize Seurat in this way to re-invest a supposedly impersonal artistic style with links to a particular maker. Rather, he was one of the earliest art historians to ascribe an explicitly anti-biographical stance to the neo-impressionists, and to foreground this aspect of their work as central to their place in the history of modern art. "For the first time since the primitive periods, not only in France but anyplace, there was a programme which brought the will of the individual into subjection," Meier-Graefe wrote.²⁶ "Personality tends to disappear here more and more," he continued, "in a method distinguished from the technical convention of the old masters by deeper research into the laws which the eye obeys."²⁷ And, making the same point even more directly, Meier-Graefe argued that Seurat's "methodical mind sought for composition a solution which should go beyond the limits of individual experience."²⁸ Indeed, Meier-Graefe is not only one of the earliest but also one of the few critics or historians to interpret Seurat's artistic method as a deliberate rejection of the biographically-oriented model of art that was so prevalent during his time.

[<top>](#)

Seurat, Anti-Biography and Authorship

- [16] Thus far I have focused solely on the reception of Seurat and neo-impressionism in relation to the issue of biography and art. But what of Seurat's own views on these matters? Though he wrote almost nothing about his work, Seurat did leave behind one text in particular that is helpful for understanding his stance on the relationship between individuality and artistic production. In 1890, the writer and journalist Maurice Beaubourg asked Seurat for a written statement about his work. Seurat supposedly never sent a response, but he did produce several drafts of one that were found in his studio after his death.²⁹ Though prior art historians have carefully analyzed the particular statements

²⁵ "Travaillant avec un acharnement dont on n'a pas l'idée, il s'était comme cloîtré dans un petit atelier du boulevard de Clichy, se privant de tout, dépensant les très maigres subsides qu'il pouvait avoir, exclusivement au profit de travaux coûteux." "Chroniques d'Aujourd'Hui: Un Vaillant," in: *Paris* (1 April, 1891), 1-2.

²⁶ Julius Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics* [1904], trans. Florence Simmonds and George W. Chrystal, London 1908, vol. I, 312.

²⁷ Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art*, 312.

²⁸ Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art*, 313.

²⁹ Reprinted in: Robert Herbert et al., *Georges Seurat, 1859-1891*, exh. cat., New York 1991, 381-382.

made in this text, I would add that its distinctly anti-biographical, anti-subjective tenor also merits acknowledgement. Seurat titled the section of the document that conveys his general views about art (as opposed to factual information such as dates and titles about his own work) the '*Esthétique*,' and it is made up entirely of general rules and formulae. The opening sentences of this section give a good sense of its content and tone: "Art is Harmony. Harmony is the analogy of opposites and the analogy of similarities of tone, of tint, of line, taking account of a dominant under the influence of the lighting, in combinations that are gay, calm, or sad."³⁰ Seurat then went on to explain in very brief terms what he considered to be opposites of tone, tint, and line, followed by a short explanation of what he meant by gaiety, calmness, and sadness of tone, tint, and line: "Gaiety of tone is the luminous dominant, of tint, the warm dominant, of line, lines above the horizontal."³¹ As such, Seurat's *esthétique* is made up entirely of absolute rules and theories, excluding any sense of the particular, the incidental, or the subjective from either the production or viewing of the work of art.

- [17] In addition to his letter to Beaubourg, there is other evidence that Seurat wanted to discourage a biographically-oriented interpretation of his work. One painting in particular, Seurat's *Jeune femme se poudrant* (*Young Woman Powdering Herself*), 1889-1890 (Fig. 4), is important to consider in this regard. The subject of the work is Madeleine Knoblock, an identification that was only discovered in the process of dividing Seurat's property after his death, when she referred to *Jeune femme* as "mon portrait."³² Despite Seurat's intimacy with the sitter – the fact that she was pregnant with their first child when he painted it lends a particular poignancy to her voluptuousness – he chose to give the painting the most generic of titles, thereby masking his relationship to the subject and instituting a divide between his work and his private life.³³ Additionally, amongst the drawings that Seurat exhibited during his lifetime are several that depict his mother, aunt, and father. These, too, were given generic titles, such as *Dîneur* (*Man Dining*, 1883-1884, private collection), and *Lecture* (*Reading*, 1886-88, Henry Moore family collection), that focus on the figures' activities rather than their identities, and that thus give no intimation of Seurat's personal connection to them.

³⁰ "L'art, c'est l'harmonie. L'harmonie, c'est l'analogie des contraires, l'analogie des semblables, de ton, de teinte, de ligne, considérés par la dominante et sous l'influence d'un éclairage en combinaisons gaies, calmes ou tristes." Herbert, *Georges Seurat*, 382.

³¹ "La gaiété de ton, c'est la dominante lumineuse; de teinte, la dominante chaude; de ligne, les lignes au-dessus de l'horizontale." Herbert, *Georges Seurat*, 382.

³² Herbert, *Georges Seurat*, 335.

³³ The relationship between this painting and Seurat's biography has long been a vexing one. Not only does it depict his companion, but Seurat scholars have debated whether or not the artist had at one point included a self-portrait in the upper left corner of the work before eventually painting over it. See Herbert, *Georges Seurat*, 335-336.



4 Georges Seurat, *Jeune femme se poudrant* (*Young Woman Powdering Herself*), 1889-1890, oil on canvas, 95.5 x 79.5 cm.

Courtauld Institute of Art, London (source: The Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons,

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georges_Seurat_021.jpg)

- [18] Some of the most important sources for helping us understand Seurat's views on artistic authorship and individuality are private letters written by him and other neo-impressionists. These letters reveal the importance to Seurat of maintaining paternity over the neo-impressionist method of painting and thus somewhat complicate the anti-biographical stance that I have ascribed to him thus far. Indeed, from these documents, we learn that Seurat was deeply concerned about receiving credit for developing certain aspects of neo-impressionist painting. For example, after Fénéon finished his pamphlet *Les Impressionnistes en 1886*, he asked Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) to check the accuracy of the text. In response, Pissarro requested that Fénéon "make clear, when dealing with Seurat, that he was the first to have the good sense to put conscientiously into practice the theories of Chevreul."³⁴ Shortly thereafter, the dealer Durand-Ruel asked Pissarro to put together a text on neo-impressionism. The painter referred him instead to Fénéon's pamphlet, and made of point of adding that, "It is M. Seurat, an artist of great value, who was the first to conceive of applying the scientific theory, after having studied it fully. Like my other colleagues, Signac, Dubois-Pillet, I only followed the example set by Seurat."³⁵ Pissarro's repeated and explicit deference to Seurat was the result, we learn from other sources, of Seurat's insistence that he be credited as the founder of the neo-

³⁴ "[...] préciser quand il s'agit de Seurat, qui le premier a eu le bon sens de mettre consciencieusement en pratique les théories de Chevreul." Janine Bailly-Herzberg, ed., *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, vol. 2, Paris 1986, 73.

impressionist method. For example, in a letter written to Paul Signac (1863-1935), Camille Pissarro jokingly suggested that "we should give Seurat an inventor's patent, if that will flatter his vanity."³⁶ Apparently, at one point Seurat had even considered ceasing to exhibit altogether because too many other artists were imitating him.

[19] Concerns about paternity and singularity dogged Seurat not just in the early years of neo-impressionism, but throughout his short career. In 1890, Fénéon wrote an article on Signac and neo-impressionism that omitted any mention of Seurat and that thus failed to credit him as the inventor of the group's method of painting. This omission prompted Seurat to write to Fénéon to set the record straight, and his response was clearly a matter of importance to him, as he wrote at least three drafts of it. "I insist on establishing the following dates indicating my prior paternity," Seurat wrote, arguing that he was the first among the neo-impressionists to discover certain theories or read certain sources and then put them into practice in his work.³⁷ In one of the unsent drafts, Seurat added, "I have documents, letters, and witnesses that I will be happy to produce if dispute arises."³⁸ As one can clearly see from these documents, the critics' complaints of a lack of authorial presence in neo-impressionist painting don't align with Seurat's strong desire for authorship over the neo-impressionist method. Though Seurat developed a method of painting that was explicitly grounded in larger systems and theories instead of the individual and the idiosyncratic, he insisted that this method be associated specifically with him. In so doing, he rejected the biographical mode of interpretation while maintaining the importance of individual authorship and stylistic originality.

[20] Among the papers found in Seurat's studio after his death were notes he had made about Eugène Delacroix, including passages copied from published excerpts of Delacroix's journals. One of the journal passages that Seurat transcribed reads: "Sterility is not only a misfortune for art, it's a blotch on the artist's talent. Everything made by a man who is not productive inevitably shows signs of fatigue. One only forms a school by offering large and numerous works as models."³⁹ This last sentence, in combination with his anxieties about paternity, suggests that Seurat was caught up in the conflicting desires that haunted so many 19th-century artists, to be influential and to be original, to have

³⁵ "C'est M. Seurat, artiste de grande valeur, qui a été le premier à avoir l'idée d'appliquer la théorie scientifique après l'avoir étudiée à fond. Je n'ai fait que suivre comme mes autres confrères Signac, Dubois-Pillet l'exemple donné par Seurat." Janine Bailly-Herzberg, ed., *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, 75.

³⁶ "[...] il faudra donner à Seurat un brevet d'introduction, si cela flatte son orgueil." Janine Bailly-Herzberg, ed., *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, 247.

³⁷ "Je tiens à établir les dates suivantes indiquant ma paternité antérieure." Félix Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin, Geneva and Paris 1970, 508.

³⁸ "J'ai documents, lettres et témoins je serai heureux de les produire en cas de contestation." Herbert, *Georges Seurat*, 384.

³⁹ Herbert, *Georges Seurat*, 395.

followers and to be unique.⁴⁰ I'll conclude with an excerpt of an 1888 letter from Seurat to Signac, in which originality is again the subject at hand, but in which Seurat's definition of originality is a slightly more inclusive and plural one. Decrying the growing number of recent adherents to the neo-impressionist movement, as distinct from the original, core group of neo-impressionists, Seurat lamented that "the more numerous we are, the less original we'll be."⁴¹ In this letter, Seurat ascribes originality to the group as a whole, rather than to just himself, writing in the first person plural rather than the first person singular. At least in this letter, Seurat found a way, if only temporarily, to reconcile his desire "to form a school," which necessarily weakens the connection between a particular artist and a specific artistic style, with his career-long desire for singularity.

[<top>](#)

⁴⁰ For more on the relationship between originality and imitation in 19th-century French art, see Richard Schiff, "The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France," in: *Yale French Studies* 66 (1984), 27-54.

⁴¹ "Plus nous serons, moins nous aurons d'originalité." Henri Dorra and John Rewald, *Seurat: L'œuvre peint, biographie et catalogue critique*, Paris 1959, LXV.