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## Georges Seurat and his Famous Pointillist Painting

### The Artist

Georges Seurat was born in Paris in 1859. He studied at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts. Little is known of his personal life and he left behind relatively few works of art, however his influence still resonates. As Impressionism was shocking the salon set of Paris, Seurat brought his own aesthetic to the movement, which came to be known as Pointillism.

More structured than the techniques used by many Impressionists, Seurat's technique, which consisted of systematically applied small touches of unmodulated color, was based on contemporary optical theories of color relationships.

Seurat died of diphtheria in 1891 at the age of 31, but his disciplined technique exerted a considerable influence over neo-impressionist artists such as Camille Pissarro, Henri Edmond Cross, and Paul Signac.

### The Painting

*A Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grande Jatte*, which is part of the collection of The Art Institute of Chicago, is oil on canvas, approximately 7' x 10' and features middle-class Parisians enjoying a leisurely afternoon.

The painting attracted a lot of attention because of its size, unusual technique, and subject matter. It shows dozens of people relaxing at a



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popular park on an island in the Seine River near Paris. Men, women, and children are engaged in fishing, rowing, sailing, strolling, chatting, or simply gazing at the river as they enjoy a pleasant afternoon. In the right foreground there is a well-dressed couple promenading with their pets. The woman is stylishly attired in a dress with a bustle, and she carries a parasol to protect her fair skin from the sun. In the background, there is a skipping girl, a courting couple, men in uniform, and many people sunning themselves or lounging under shady trees. Despite the fact that this is a rather crowded tableau, the people seem to be hardly aware of each other. They also seem strangely static, almost like sculptures rather than moving figures.

The painting brought Seurat fame and made him the leader of an artistic school. The painting is considered a benchmark example of Post-Impressionism/Pointillism. Short-lived as a movement (largely due to Seurat's untimely death), the style is historically important for its introduction of new elements into avant-garde painting—such as the simplification of form, a classical mode of spatial organization and a sophisticated sense of decorative unity. Basing his works on abstract schemes rather than pure sensation, Seurat opened wholly unforeseen possibilities for the development of modern art.

It took Seurat two years to complete the painting (from 1884 to 1886). Two years after his first Post-Impressionist work was shown at the Salon des Indépendants, Seurat exhibited *A Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grande Jatte* at the eighth and final Impressionist group show in 1886.

*Source: Art Institute of Chicago's Art Explorer online resource center*



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