

Georges Seurat (1859 - 1891)

(Pronounced: zhorz sir-ah)

Costume: T-shirt painted with colored dots and straw hat with polka dot ribbon headband

Props:

- Picnic basket and picnic supplies
- Articles pertaining to the print: umbrella, fan, flowers, book, fishing pole (all items to be kept inside the picnic basket except fishing pole)
- Print of *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*
- Print of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*

Do you have any idea where I might be going or doing? (*On a picnic*) Where do you usually have picnics? (At a park, yard, lake, etc.) This imaginary picnic we are going is a special one because you will have to imagine a different time and place. What are some items we would take if we were going on a picnic? (*Take a few suggestions*)

Who can remember what the elements of composition are? (*Color, texture, light, shadow and line*) Since we are going to discuss mainly color and texture today I would like you to keep that in mind as I pick each item from the basket. All of these items are things that are in this famous painting.

Before we see the painting, let's review briefly the technique of another FAME artist we spoke about this year who also used color and texture in a very unique way. (*Show Starry Night by Vincent Van Gogh*) Do you remember the name of this painting and the artist? Do you remember what Van Gogh's technique was when he painted? (*Large, sweeping motions with a palette knife the make the texture that we see in Starry Night*) Our artist for today liked using color and texture but the method used was very different from that of Van Gogh's, he tried something that had never been tried before. What I am wearing might give you a hint about our artist's technique. (*Dots*)

(*Show print*) This is called **Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte** (la grahnd zhot) by Georges Seurat. As you can see Seurat didn't like to paint with swirls like Van Gogh. Instead he painted with tiny dots, or points of color. This technique is known as "Pointillism", or "divisionism" as Seurat liked to call it. Seurat knew how to blend colors on a palette, but didn't want to create color on the canvas that way. He saw himself as a scientific painter, and wanted to paint in a way that showed what he called his "scientific rules for painting". He wanted to keep the primary colors pure. What are the primary colors? (*Red, blue, yellow*) Seurat would use tiny dots of the primary colors side-by-side on the canvas, so the colors would be combined by the viewer's eye. This made his colors brilliant and pure.

Artist Biography: Georges Pierre Seurat was born in Paris in 1859. He was the youngest, by far, of three children born 12 years after his brother and sister. His family was a typical middleclass family -- they lived comfortably but not lavishly. While Seurat was growing up his father was a rather absentee sort. His father lived in another house in suburban Paris and only returned home every Tuesday evening to dine with his wife and children. These meals were interesting to Seurat as a child because it gave him the opportunity to observe his father, who had lost an arm during a hunting trip and used a mechanical arm. This meant that the changing of eating utensils -- from fork to spoon and back again -- was a fascinating procedure to watch.

Very little is known of Seurat's early childhood except that he was said to be rather distant and secretive. He liked to draw and his mother and uncle encouraged him. He entered the local drawing

school at the age of 15 and a year later he entered the well known Ecole de Beaux-Arts where he studied for 4 years. After some time in the military he moved to a studio which he shared with an artist friend. Seurat concentrated on drawing and did not actually begin painting until about the 80's. *(Since Seurat did not date these early pieces, we cannot be sure of the precise date.)*

When he did start painting, he painted in a manner that was consistent with his temperament. He was an extremely disciplined and logical being, so he sought "scientific rules for painting". He studied available data on the theory of color and approached his work like a scientist. From this scientific study evolved a new style of painting is called Pointillism.

Seurat was very dedicated and to his work and structured. He would work at his painting six days a week, from 9.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. Even at this pace it would take Seurat 2 years to complete *La Grande Jatte*. Seurat had been painting only about 10 years when he became ill and died suddenly from either meningitis or infectious angina at the age of only 32. He finished only 7 large paintings in his lifetime but there were many smaller scenes and sketches. As with Van Gogh, little of his work was sold before his death.

La Grande Jatte is an island in the Seine River in Paris, but literally translated, grand jatte means "big basin". It was a favorite picnic spot and one of the few places where people of different walks of life met. Seurat got ideas for the people by going to the island of La Grande Jatte on warm afternoons. Before he began this painting, Seurat made several pencil drawings and small paintings, which have been marked as his "study" paintings. *(Show print of the "study" painting)* The studies were not as detailed as the final painting but show different approaches. Some of them were so good that he actually exhibited them. The finished piece was very large, 6 1/2 feet high by 10 feet wide. Seurat had to use a ladder to paint some parts of La Grande Jatte. In fact, the lady holding the umbrella in the foreground is about as tall as I am.

Can you see items from the picnic basket in the painting? Can you see the individual dots of paint? Seurat varied the size of the dots for different items to help create texture, e.g., the tree foliage is made with larger dots than the ladies' dresses. His orientation of the dots (*horizontal versus slanted or vertical*) also helps differentiate between the surfaces, e.g., the water surface is horizontal but the dots that create the tree are more vertical. Do these differences give you a feeling of texture? *(Yes)*

When La Grande Jatte was originally shown in the last Impressionist show in 1886, the show was a disaster. The critics were very unkind and very few people understood what Seurat was trying to do. Later shows, however, did better. Even though few other artists ever chose to pursue pointillism, it is known today for being the beginning of the neo- impressionist art, a more scientific and controlled approach to impressionism. Today this painting can be seen at the Chicago Art Institute.

Optional Art Activity: Have students get out felt pens in red, yellow, and blue. On a piece of paper ask them to trace a small circle about 3-4 inches in diameter. Then ask them to choose two colors of felt pen and make dots to fill the circle. For older students they can actually hold two pens at a time. When they are finished they can show the circles to someone across the room. The red and blue will look purple; yellow and blue will look green; and red and yellow will look orange.

