

Meet the Masters

October Program

Grade 8

First Impressions .Color Theory

Georges Seurat "A Sunday Afternoon at La Grande Jatte"

Claude Monet "Cliff Walk at Pourville"

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does the painting "A Sunday Afternoon at La Grande Jatte" by Seurat look different from Monet's "Cliff Walk at Pourville"?
2. Do you think each artist wanted to achieve something different in their paintings?
3. How is color used in each painting?
4. Do you think Seurat mixed the paint before he applied it to the canvas? Why or why not?
5. What do you feel when you look at each painting?

Hands- On Art Activity- Paint a Color Wheel, Value Scale and an Outdoor Activity Scene

Primary colors: red, yellow and blue

Secondary colors: green, violet and orange

Value: the lightness or darkness of a color

Teacher Preparation: Make a copy of the color wheel and value study sheet to give to each student.

Materials:

9"x 12" medium to heavy paper
Pencil
Large circle for tracer or a compass
Ruler
Tempera Paints
Small paint brushes
Paper plates for palettes
Palette knives
Cotton swabs
Water containers
Paper towels and newspaper

Directions:

1. Show students a color wheel and discuss the colors and where they are in relationship to one another.
2. Have students make their own color wheel using a circle and ruler to separate the circle into twelve equal sized pie shapes. This is the color wheel and should be placed near the top of the paper. Give each student a handout for aid in making their color wheel and value study.
3. Distribute a palette to each student with red, blue, yellow, black and white paint.
4. Paint first the primary colors on the color wheel; these will not require mixing of paint.
5. Paint the secondary colors; these will require that the primary colors be mixed. **Mix only with a palette knife, do not mix with a brush.**

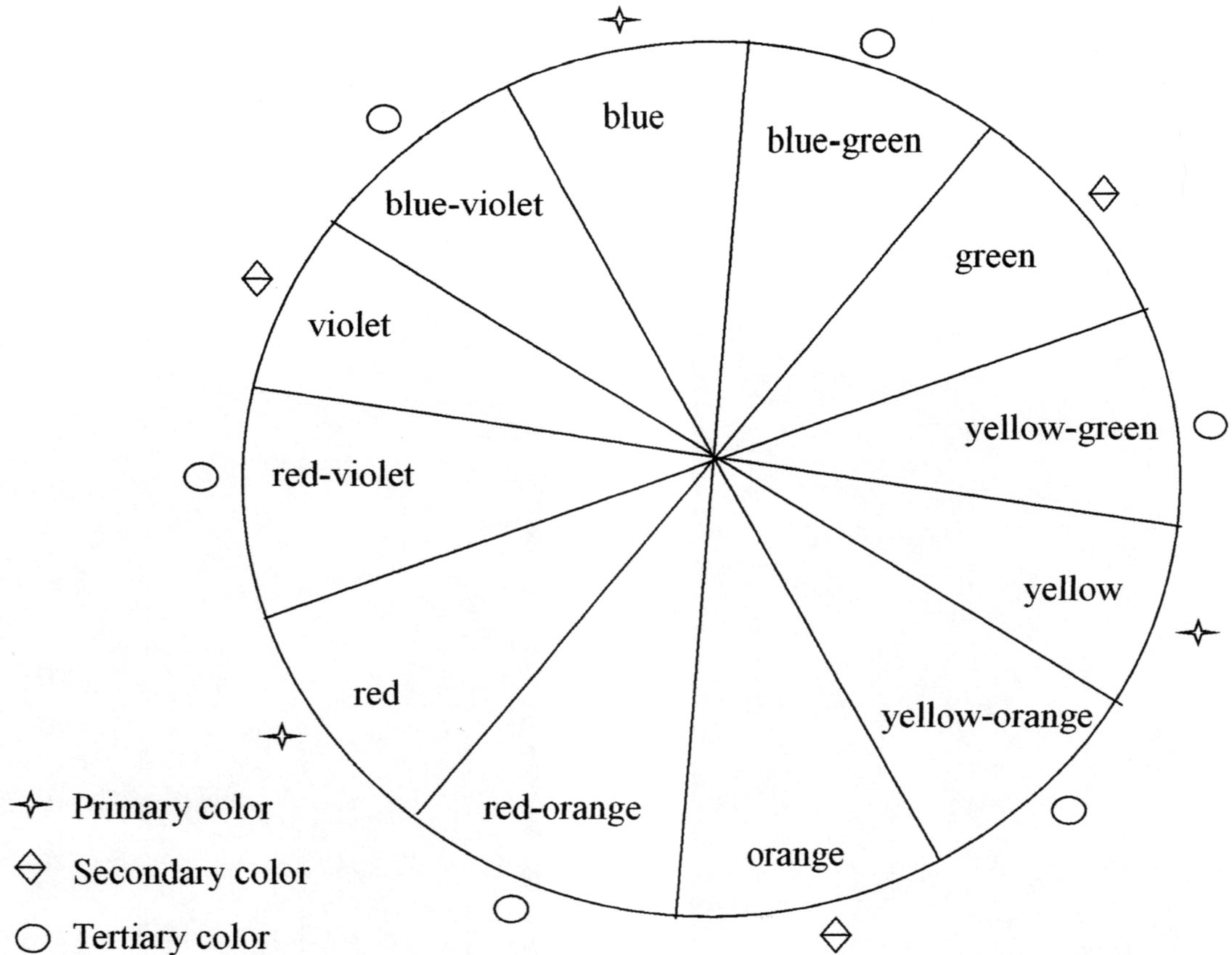
6. Paint the tertiary colors; these will require that the secondary and primary colors be mixed.
7. As you proceed to mix the colors, paint a small dot of each color below the color wheel, so that the colors are close, but not touching. By doing this exercise you will better understand the concepts Seurat used in his painting "A Sunday Afternoon at La Grande Jatte". This is called a "color study".
8. Using the ruler, make a rectangle and divide it into six even boxes. This should be placed near the bottom of the paper.
9. Mix black and white in various proportions to create different shades of gray. Paint these shades next to one another to make a value study. Begin with pure white on one end and end with pure black on the other end.

Follow-up Activity to the Color Wheel and Value Study:

This activity will reinforce basic concepts of color theory. Use the same materials as for the color wheel with the addition of cotton swabs.

1. Have students picture an outdoor gathering (picnic etc.). Mentally divide the areas into colors and think of how each color will look when next to another color. Draw your composition lightly in pencil on a fresh piece of paper.
2. Using a small brush or cotton swab, paint the areas with each color using Seurat's technique of pointillism. Notice how the colors look when placed next to another color.
3. Good color combinations: complimentary red/green, yellow/ purple, blue/ orange.
4. Your painting should show how colors can "blend" on the paper. Clean-up.

Create A Color Wheel



Before Seurat made his pointillist painting, he explored the science of color.

Color the **primary** colors (red, yellow, blue) with paint.

Color the **secondary** colors by mixing the two primary colors on either side of it.

Color the **tertiary** colors by mixing the two surrounding colors (one primary and one secondary).

As the colors are painted, place a small dot of each color below the color wheel. This is called a "color study".

Complimentary colors are those that are opposite each other on the color wheel.

Value Study

Mix black and white in various proportions to create different shades of gray.

Paint these shades next to one another to make a value study.

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White

80% white
20% black

60% white
40% black

40% white
60% black

20% white
80% black

Black

Claude Monet

Claude Monet (1840-1926) was a French painter and leader of the Impressionist movement. He greatly influenced the history of art by painting his response to the visual world. Monet was interested in light and how it influenced the colors of the natural world. His paintings were fresh and bright in color with paint applied in thick deliberate brush strokes. He was one of the first artists to paint "en plein air" (out of doors). Monet experimented throughout his art career looking for ways to capture light in the visual world.

Monet was born in Paris, then moved with his family to Le Havre on the Normandy coast. The coast with the water and bright sunlight influenced Monet's lifelong interest in light and color.

In 1859, he visited Paris, frequented cafes, and studied at the Academie Suisse, an art school that provided models but no instruction. In 1861 he was drafted into the army and served in the African cavalry in Algeria for over a year, but was sent back to Normandy on sick leave in the late summer of 1862. By autumn he returned to Paris where he enrolled in the studio of Charles Gleyre (1808-1874), an instructor at the Academy's Ecole des Beaux Arts. There he met artists who were to become his friends and fellow rebels: Renoir, Frederic Bazille, Alfred Sisley and other students. During the next several years Monet and his friends painted on weekends and holidays in the forests of Fontainebleau and along the coast of Honfleur. Here the group developed their theories of color and light in their paintings. This was the beginning of Impressionism.

By spring 1868, Monet moved to Bennecourt on the bank of the Seine River. Here he brought along his model, soon to be wife Camille Doncieux and their infant son Jean. Monet painted many scenes on location along the banks of the Seine. Camille and his friends occupy the shimmering, landscapes that Monet painted during his brief stay.

Monet later became friends with Camille Pissarro, Paul Cezanne and Edgar Degas. Through these artists Monet began exhibiting his work at the Salon on Paris. Monet's first submission of two seascapes were accepted in 1865. The following year he displayed two more paintings. But other than a painting of the port of Le Havre in 1868, the Salon rejected Monet's work for the rest of the decade.

From the friendship between Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Renoir and Manet a new direction of art for the first Impressionist Exhibit of 1874. These artists were scorned by the conventional art world, thus a critique responded to the first exhibition of their work as an "impression". The name was adopted by the group and thus began the new direction for art. The aim of this movement was to produce paintings entirely faithful to reality- to make an exact analysis of tone and color and capture the reflections of surfaces on objects.

Monet settled in Giverny, north-eastern France in 1883. In Giverny he created gardens filled with elaborate arrangements of plants and flowers. Here in the 1890's he began painting subjects in multiple series recording the varying light conditions at different times of the day. This is where he painted his most famous series "Waterlillies", the shimmering pools and shadowy atmosphere envelopes the viewer. Suffused in light and color the one is amazed that Monet was going blind when he painted these massive works.

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THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
TEACHER SERVICES
FACT SHEET

Georges Seurat

French, 1859-1891

A Sunday on La Grande Jatte--1884, 1884-1886

Oil on canvas

81 3/4 x 121 1/4 in.

Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.224

Georges Seurat was born in France in 1859, a time when society was in flux. With the advent of industrialization and wave after wave of revolution, traditional rules and hierarchies were broken. Artists also broke with tradition and experimented with new techniques, chose unconventional subjects, and formed groups to create an identity and exhibit their work outside the official establishments. Seurat was a member of a lower-middle class family and began his higher education at the conservative and highly-respected *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Calculating and intellectual, Seurat developed his ideas and technique by studying many types of art. He spent much time contemplating works in the *Musée du Louvre*, including Egyptian sculptures, Assyrian reliefs, paintings of little-known Italian Renaissance artists, and works of earlier 19th-century French artists like Ingres, Millet, and Delacroix. Seurat also collected fashion plates, cartoons, and other material that was easily accessible to serve as models for his figure studies. By age twenty, Seurat was in contact with the Impressionists, who had a significant influence on the young artist. He embraced the Impressionists' interest in modern life and leisure. Unlike the Impressionists who were interested in capturing the transient effects of natural light, however, Seurat created a new style of painting that allowed much light into the canvas, while it drew on recently-formulated optical theories.

Seurat painted in a deliberate and scientific manner based on the style referred to as pointillism, or the term which Seurat preferred, divisionism, in which small strokes of pure color, when seen from a distance, are perceived as shapes and forms. In addition he applied what is called the "chromo-luminist method" in order to capture and transfer to the canvas a natural union of light and color. According to this method, Seurat never mixed pigments. His aim was to get as much light as possible into the composition. Furthermore, he applied his small strokes of complementary hues side-by-side because he believed in the law of simultaneous contrasts which concludes that no color ever is seen purely or individually. Colors are seen together as they affect one another. When one views complementary colors next to each other from a distance, the brain perceives only one color -- the resultant color from the mix of the two. This is called optical mixing. Seurat applied this technique when he painted the grass, for example. Another modern approach was the idea that color and line could convey specific moods. For example, warm colors may evoke a feeling of

happiness, cool tones may convey sadness and, when combined, the tones communicate a sense of calm. He also postulated that horizontal lines suggest calm, while vertical lines connote excitement. Because of the structural forms and implied emotional content in his paintings, Seurat is considered to be one of the forefathers of modern art.

Seurat often began his paintings out of doors and completed them in his studio. He was a systematic artist who executed numerous drawings and at least thirty-eight color sketches before painting the final version of *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—1884. Seurat was a self-effacing artist who was reluctant to discuss his methods and theories. He was a prolific painter over a brief ten-year period which ended with his sudden and untimely death from dyptheria at the age of thirty-one.

Exhibited in the last Impressionist exhibition of 1886, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—1884 is regarded as Seurat's masterpiece. The painting has become an icon of a pleasurable Sunday afternoon in the park. Seurat portrayed the late-19th-century scene by painting characters in high fashion and including an exotic monkey on a leash. At this time, zoos were a popular attraction, and there was a fad to own exotic pets. Many scholars interpret it as highly theoretical, though Seurat allegedly claimed the painting did not contain any hidden social or political meaning. Traditionally, critics and the public have revered it for its outward appearance: various groupings of people enjoying a Sunday afternoon of recreation and relaxation on an island. Seurat has been lauded for his historical costumes, sculptural figures, and integrated composition.

In view of modern scholarship, the painting represents two social themes: the family and a leisure day. Sunday was seen as a very important day for families to enjoy leisure time together and thus rejuvenate family life. At this time a new class—the lower-middle class—emerged and was the key to certain social developments. La Grande Jatte is a small island on the north bank of the Seine River where such people gathered. The park was not particularly fashionable or glamorous, nor was it frequented by the wealthy or affluent. For this reason, many scholars believe that Seurat portrayed lower-middle class subjects dressed in the attire of the wealthier bourgeoisie middle class.

The painting contains about forty characters of different ages, sexes, social classes, and occupations. They are mostly women and children; however, there is one family of a father, mother, and child. Other characters portrayed include soldiers (top left of center), a rower (lower left), a nurse (round hat and white scarf, middle left) and members of the upper bourgeoisie (top hat, cane, long jacket). The focal point is a small girl dressed in white who faces the viewer. She is innocence embodied—a young girl surrounded by people affected by complex social and moral codes of behavior. The most prominent characters include an upper-bourgeoisie man escorting a woman with the monkey on a leash. These people are seen as defying the social order and propriety of this setting. The

woman has been identified as a prostitute because the monkey is a traditional symbol of promiscuity.

The formal aspects of this painting also are intricate and sophisticated. Seurat's placement of figures creates a controlled, regular rhythm which is seen in a series of vertical and horizontal planes, a repetition of bustles, sails, and parasols and the positioning of the characters in relation to the picture plane. For example, some figures stand erect, others recline horizontally and some are seen frontally while others are in profile. The figures are integrated into the landscape, which Seurat painted first, through a series of shadows and angles. The artist achieved a significant depth of space, for example, through the strong diagonal lines of the shoreline and pathway through the trees in the upper right area of the painting. He also used color in this perspectival composition by gradually muting the tones of figures as they recede into the background. Furthermore, to achieve this sense of deep space, Seurat simplified the figures and blurred their outlines to integrate them into the lush landscape. The vertical figures and trees contrast with the reclining figures. The lines vary in length and height, enabling the viewer's eye to move throughout this intricate study in form, line, and color. Seurat used compositional elements to explore the current social, class, and familial tensions of an increasingly mechanized and, as many people thought, impersonal society. As a result, Seurat's composition appears both real and surreal.

In conclusion, viewers flock to this painting because of its important position in the history of art. Whether one considers this work a portrayal of a pleasant Sunday afternoon or a commentary on the social and economic tensions of late 19th century France, the viewer can relate to a celebration of the past and feel a sense of awe while contemplating a sophisticated, stylistic portrayal of a simple activity that has brought almost everyone great pleasure.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to *look closely* and describe what is happening in this painting. What can we learn from looking closely at the activities, clothes, gestures, and expressions of the figures? There are forty characters of different ages, sexes, social classes, and occupations; ask students to identify them. What kind of day is it? What time of day is it? What do the shadows tell us? Why is everyone gathered at the edge of the lake? Are the people enjoying themselves? What else can students say about what they observe in the painting? Ask students to write a description (individually or in groups) of what is happening in this painting. Ask them to describe in *words* the visual information provided by Seurat. After these are completed, ask students to read them aloud and discuss whether their words (descriptions) are grounded in visual information found in the painting.

2. *Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte—1884*, mirrors Parisian life during the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, a time of dramatic transitions from Victorian ideals and customs to the great outpouring of technological

discoveries. Wonders of the new era of inventions, such as hot air balloons, trolleys, and bicycles were making their debuts. The pace of life accelerated. Ask students to research some of the technological discoveries of this era. Ask them to analyze how these inventions would have affected the people represented in the painting. Based on information gathered, ask students to choose a figure or character in the painting and write about the inner thoughts of that person. Remember, this is considered to be a day of rest from all work-related activities.

3. Seurat studied the effects of the representation of light and color and especially the ways that pigments work together to create intense visual illusions. This scientific investigation of placing colors carefully side by side on canvas will create a more intense effect while the actual blending of colors takes place in the viewer's eye. Complementary colors, opposites on the color wheel, appear next to each other in Seurat's work, each taking on an interactive vibrancy. Using oil pastels (or paint) asks students to create their own color experiment with placing complementary colors next to each other. What colors are blended by the eye as a result of placing what colors next to each other? Ask students to use this method to create a drawing/painting of a form in nature that resembles a sphere of cylinder? Ask them to discuss their discoveries. Return to the *Grande Jatte*. Ask students to review the placement of color. What have they learned from Seurat's scientific exploration of color?

4. Seurat labored extensively over this painting, studying and reworking the composition and color. He did this through numerous preliminary drawings and oil sketches (the Art Institute has one sketch and two drawings). Ask students to create many preliminary sketches of a leisure event that they participate in (done both in pencil and in color). Have them sketch from life whenever possible. Ask students to create a painting or pastel drawing based on all their preliminary sketches. How have the preliminary drawings aided in the development of the picture?

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