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Author(s): Mary Mathews Gedo

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The *Grande Jatte* as the Icon of a New Religion: A Psycho-Iconographic Interpretation

MARY MATHEWS GEDO, *Chicago*

"The Grande Jatte is one of those great paintings in which every generation finds the meaning best suited to it."

JOHN RUSSELL¹

ART CRITICISM has entered a post-formalist era, and the strict stylistic analyses of works that prevailed in the past have been replaced by symbolic interpretations of content. The enigmatic nature of Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* (pl. 2) has made it a special favorite with art historians imbued with this new methodology. It is perhaps an ironic commentary on our age of affluence that many of these evaluations of the *Grande Jatte* emphasize Marxist politico-economic readings of the painting, now perceived as filled with references to struggles between the bourgeoisie and working classes.²

Erwin Panofsky long ago pointed out that the construction of valid depth interpretations of paintings requires that the scholar possess a profound understanding not only of the history of culture, but of human psychology. In short, art historians undertaking this type of depth analysis must be able to recognize and evaluate the

significant role that the personality, character, and experiences of an artist inevitably play in shaping his or her oeuvre, as well as being aware of their own psychological response to the work—and to the artist.³

Marxist critics have generally ignored Panofsky's warning, preferring to read the *Grande Jatte* without considering any extant evidence concerning Seurat's cast of mind and personal motives that might challenge the validity of their analyses. Despite their cavalier disregard of the fact, the readings of the *Grande Jatte* provided by the Marxists and their allies depend just as completely on their internalized vision of Seurat as does the overtly psychological interpretation contained in this essay. Without exception these politico-economic readings are all predicated on an implicit internal vision of Seurat as a person who actively interested himself in the social problems of his day, empathized with those whose class and privilege levels differed radically from his own, and determined to use his great picture as a painted manifesto to publicize such issues.

Nothing we know about Seurat's history, neither his own statements, the eye-witness accounts of acquaintances, nor the writings of contemporary critics who

FIGURE 1. Georges Seurat (French, 1859–1891). *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* (detail of pl. 2).



knew him, supports such a thesis.⁴ If it is true that we possess precious little information about Seurat from which to construct a psychological profile of him (especially as compared with the abundant primary data available about such leading contemporaries as Claude Monet and Paul Gauguin), what we do know about his personality seems internally quite consistent and congruent with the interpretation of the *Grande Jatte* presented here.

Seurat's Character and Personal History

The relevance of the details of Seurat's personal history and character for the formal and iconographic nature assumed by the *Grande Jatte* requires the following review of biographical details, with which the reader may already be familiar.



Without exception, acquaintances and friends portrayed Seurat (see fig. 2) as a secretive, solitary, eccentric personality. When asked to characterize the artist physically, friends likened him to a figure from an ancient Assyrian relief, a Renaissance painting, or even to Donatello's statue of Saint George—in short, to images from other times and places, associations suggestive of the artist's unusual character and attitudes.⁵ To the observant, and maliciously witty, Edgar Degas, Seurat seemed more like a notary than a rare creature from the past, what with his pedantic manner and somber, correct clothing.⁶ But Degas's mockery focused on another aspect of Seurat fully as central to his character as his other-worldliness: his pronounced compulsivity and extreme degree of organization. It was probably these characteristics that prompted his colleague Edmond Aman-Jean to peg the artist as "the perfect model of the bourgeois," adding, "Seurat's mother, whom I saw only once, was of the same type."⁷ Seurat's background was, indeed, solidly bourgeois and, unlike most of his artistic peers, he never had to depend for survival on the sale of his work. Instead his father supplied Georges—the third of his four children—with a regular, though by no means princely, allowance. It permitted the artist to live modestly but securely, to maintain an independent studio, and eventually even to support a mistress and infant son (about whom his family knew nothing until one day in 1891 when the dying artist arrived at his mother's doorstep with his little family in tow).

Seurat's father, a bailiff and property owner, seems also to have been a truly eccentric individual whose odd behavior and secretive ways were certainly strongly imprinted on Georges, whether by heredity or example. At least by the time most of Seurat's friends knew the family, the artist's father lived apart from his wife and children for the most part in a country retreat at Le Raincy or in a separate apartment he maintained at La Villette (a poor district of Paris), the center of his bailiff's work. He faithfully returned to the family domicile only on Tuesdays—a weekly reunion from which Seurat never dared absent himself.⁸ We do not know when the father effectively separated from his family; perhaps this occurred

FIGURE 2. Georges Seurat. Photograph. Photo: Dorra and Rewald, p. xxxi, fig. 3.

soon after the death of Seurat's younger sibling, a brother who was born in 1863 and died in 1868. (Seurat, born on December 2, 1859, was therefore between three and four years that child's senior.) Whether or not this tragedy precipitated the father's departure, it must have profoundly affected the entire family, including Georges, by then a boy of eight or nine.⁹

Seurat's two surviving siblings, his brother, Emile, and sister, Marie Berthe, were respectively twelve and thirteen years older than the future artist, who consequently lived much of his childhood alone with a doting mother whose tenderness toward him was probably accentuated by the loss of her youngest child. Throughout his brief life, Seurat remained very attached to his mother. Although the artist spent most of his waking hours in his separate studio, he continued to live at home until his death in 1891; impeccably clad, he dined with his mother every night, even after he had established the liaison with his mistress, Madeleine Knobloch, who would bear him a son. Unlike her husband and older son, Madame Seurat was very supportive of Georges's artistic ambitions. In view of his extreme attachment to his mother, it is perhaps not so surprising that Seurat chose as his mistress a girl whose social status and character were as far removed from that of his mother as possible.¹⁰

No matter how much or little time the elder Seurat spent with his family, there can be no doubt that he exerted a profound effect on Georges's character, for the son grew up to share his father's precise, methodical approach to life. Surely only the son of a most painstaking man could have invented Pointillism! From his father too the artist probably inherited his unusual visual-motor skills; although Seurat senior had lost a hand in an accident, he was so dexterous in managing his prosthesis that he could neatly carve and distribute a roast, slice by slice, impaled on his hook.¹¹ The fact that the father, so stern and rigid, possessed this dangerous-looking appendage must have added to young Georges's awe of him; small wonder that acquaintances noticed Seurat's seeming timidity and gentleness (though they all recognized his underlying, extreme stubbornness and determination).¹² Seurat's father was an extreme religious fanatic who engaged in heterodox religious rituals. Fond of enacting the role of a priest, he rigged up a chapel at his country villa, where he "said" Mass for as many of the local peasants as he could corral to play the congregation, while his gardener enacted the role of assisting deacon.¹³ He also owned an enormous collection of popular

religious prints and used many of them to decorate the walls of his villa. The artist's own interest in popular broadsides—a large number of such *images populaires* were discovered in his studio following his death—probably grew out of his identification with his father's unusual propensity for collecting cheap holy pictures.¹⁴ As one might expect from someone who had grown up in such peculiar circumstances, Seurat showed meager social skills and had little empathy for others. Acquaintances all described him as quiet and withdrawn in social situations, except when discussing art, especially his own theories and projects, when he would become animated and involved. (The critic Téodor de Wyzewa noted that Seurat had planned out his projects thirty years into the future and never tired of explaining in detail, to anyone he could buttonhole, his researches, the sequences he planned to use, and the number of years he expected to spend on each project.)¹⁵ Quite insistent on receiving due credit for the originality of his ideas, Seurat was eternally apprehensive (like the equally suspicious Paul Cézanne) that his artistic peers would steal, simplify, and cheapen his innovations. These suspicions led him, on more than one occasion, to make cruel accusations of plagiarism. So sensitive was the kindly Camille Pissarro to Seurat's quasi-paranoid fearfulness that the older artist constantly found himself reassuring the world—not to mention Seurat himself—about the primacy of the latter's artistic ideas.¹⁶

No one quotes a single remark of Seurat's that documents any humanitarian interests on his part. Nor do we possess any proof that the imagery of the *Grande Jatte* contained veiled political messages actually comprehended, but deliberately ignored, by friendly critics of the period. T. J. Clark may argue that Félix Fénéon, the critic closest to Seurat, purposefully downplayed the *Grande Jatte*'s daring social implications, but it seems much more logical to infer that reviewers did not comment about such issues because they were neither uppermost in Seurat's mind when he created the picture nor in those of his contemporaries who viewed it.¹⁷ Had any of the numerous critics then unreceptive to the glories of the *Grande Jatte* discerned such underlying themes in it, they surely would not have missed the opportunity to use such observations to ridicule the painter and his creation still more savagely.

Although Seurat obviously intended that his great painting appear totally modern and up-to-the-minute, he simultaneously realized that he was creating the

Grande Jatte for the ages. Well aware, like Michelangelo before him, that the specific problems of his era would matter very little to the average viewer a thousand years in the future, Seurat designed his figures to merit comparison with those depicted on the Parthenon frieze, not to document the transient social problems of his period.¹⁸

The Creation of the *Grande Jatte*

The elder Seurat's usurpation of the rights and rites of the priesthood dramatically demonstrated to his artist son that one need not await ordination by a bishop to assume holy orders. But if his father's unconventional behavior encouraged Georges in his own daring ambitions, it also reinforced in his mind the central importance of the methodical approach to every endeavor. Although Seurat's father aspired to offer Mass, he was neither qualified nor entitled to do so, and he could only play act the role of priest, pretending to himself and his "congregation" that he could effect the miracle of the Eucharist. Both aspects of the paternal lesson played a part in the evolution of the *Grande Jatte*. Seurat initiated his artistic career with a lengthy, self-imposed apprenticeship initially devoted solely to the creation of drawings; gradually he added small panel paintings and oils on canvas to his repertory. Then in 1883 the young artist suddenly and boldly made the quantum leap from painting modest-sized pictures to creating a mural-sized canvas, *Bathing, Asnières* (pl. 1). That a young man in his early twenties should have undertaken a project of this scope (at a time when far fewer artists dared to work on such a scale than is the case today) reflects a level of self-confidence that one might label hubris, had not Seurat's belief in his genius been so well justified. By the spring of 1884, he had completed *Bathing*, and he immediately set to work on the *Grande Jatte*, a composition that he must have had in mind for some time. From the moment he first conceived of this project, Seurat surely realized that it would play a unique role in his career, and in the history of art as well. From the start, the *Grande Jatte* became Seurat's magnificent obsession. Never again would the creation of a single canvas involve so many preparatory drawings and preliminary painted sketches on his part, culminating in the definitive oil study (p. 195, fig. 26).

That Seurat intended to create a revolution with the *Grande Jatte* seems certain enough. The question remains: What kings of modernism did he hope to dethrone when he unveiled the *Grande Jatte* to the Parisian public? Edouard Manet and Claude Monet, the foremost avant-garde painters then active in France, immediately come to mind. Seurat spoke admiringly of Manet and his importance in the evolution of modernism, but complained about Monet's "coldness" (an interesting reaction from a man who could scarcely be described as warm and spontaneous himself) and apparently downplayed the importance of Monet's example in his own artistic development.¹⁹ Significantly, among Seurat's contemporaries, only Manet and Monet had executed paintings that might be described as direct ancestors of the *Grande Jatte*, not only in their related subject matter, but in their revolutionary intent: each had created a large composition on the theme of a "luncheon on the grass." Though both pictures had been created twenty years or more before Seurat initiated the *Grande Jatte*, events of early 1884 again focused the attention of the Parisian art world on these pictures. The great memorial exhibition honoring Manet, who had died the previous April, opened in January 1884, at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.²⁰ Seurat surely attended this major artistic event (perhaps many times), where he would have had the opportunity not only to view the *Luncheon*, but Manet's final masterpiece, *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881–82; London, Courtauld Institute), a canvas whose implications would not have been lost on the younger artist either. But it must have been the *Luncheon* (fig. 3) that spoke to Seurat most directly as he prepared to paint his own interpretation of Parisians enjoying a summer outing beside the water.

In the early spring of 1884, Monet enlisted the help of his dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, in a determined effort to reclaim his enormous version of the *Luncheon*, which he had been forced to abandon when he moved from Argenteuil to Vétheuil in 1878.²¹ He soon succeeded in repossessing the canvas, only to discover that large sections had been destroyed by mildew during its years in storage. He salvaged two intact portions, which he retained in his own collection throughout his lifetime. As an elderly man, he kept the major central remnant on exhibition in one of his studios (fig. 4) and proudly posed for his photograph before the painting. It seems logical to assume that he showed it off to artist friends like Pissarro and Auguste Renoir as soon as he had it in



FIGURE 3. Edouard Manet (French, 1832–1883). *Luncheon on the Grass*, 1863. Oil on canvas; 208 × 264 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux.



FIGURE 4. Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926). *Luncheon on the Grass* (central fragment), 1865–66. Oil on canvas; 248 × 217 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

hand again. Seurat could have learned about this rescue operation and the appearance of the surviving fragment through his many shared artistic contacts with Monet.

If Seurat's knowledge of these two versions of the "luncheon" theme helped to inspire his own, new undertaking, the history of both pictures also conveyed implicit cautionary tales that must have reinforced his determination to follow the most careful procedures in executing his own great figurative landscape. Manet's *Luncheon* had apparently been a studio production, painted indoors from start to finish, a fact reflected in the character of the landscape, which looks a bit as though the artist had rolled a painted backdrop down behind his sitters, then reproduced it in his picture. The

young Monet, no mean competitor himself, apparently determined to outdo Manet by painting his composition outdoors, so he executed the large-scale final study, at least in part, in the forest of Fontainebleau, planning to enlarge it to its definitive scale (fifteen by twenty feet) in his studio.²² This ambitious project proved to exceed both his artistic and financial means, and Monet was finally forced to abandon the canvas unfinished.

Seurat intended to avoid similar problems by basing his painting on elements elaborated independently in nu-

FIGURE 5. Auguste Renoir (French, 1841–1919). *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1881. Oil on canvas; 129.5 × 172.7 cm. Washington, D.C., The Phillips Collection.



FIGURE 6. Federico Zandomeneghi (Italian, 1841–1917). *The Place d'Anvers*, 1880. Oil on canvas; 100 × 135 cm. Piacenza, Galleria d'Arte Moderna Ricci Oddi.



merous careful drawings and panel paintings made on the site, then assembled in the studio into a single composition, organized according to the mathematical proportions of the Golden Section. He also applied the most up-to-date scientific information about the laws of color mixture and perception to his painting process, and the consistency of light depicted in the *Grande Jatte* certainly helps to unify this composition, which its creator envisioned as a work that would wed science to art in a permanent, royal union.²³

The Impressionist exhibitions held in Paris in 1881 and 1882 provided additional fertile sources of inspiration for Seurat, who religiously attended these events.²⁴ At the 1882 show, he would have seen Renoir's delightful picture *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (fig. 5), depicting a group of the artist's friends dining at an outdoor restaurant on the Seine, whose sparkling waters are visible in the background. If the similarities between Renoir's canvas and the *Grande Jatte* seem more generic than specific, the same cannot be said of Federico Zandomeneghi's *Place d'Anvers* (fig. 6), included in the sixth Impressionist exhibition, which opened in Paris on April 1, 1881. Zandomeneghi's canvas shows startling formal and iconographic relationships with Seurat's picture. In view of the latter's quasi-paranoid resentment over the alleged appropriation of his inventions by con-

temporaries, his free incorporation of so many of Zandomeneghi's seems startling—proving perhaps the validity of the adage that good artists borrow, but great artists steal.

But Seurat by no means limited himself to ideas gleaned from more or less contemporary works (including those of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, another important model for the younger artist). Rather he turned to the great works of the past as major sources of inspiration for a composition that he obviously intended should be timeless, as well as absolutely contemporary. Can it be accidental that Seurat's selection of works from the past concentrated so heavily on great religious decorations? It seems likely that this choice was both conscious and deliberate, reflecting the fact that, from the start, he conceived of the *Grande Jatte* as a modern icon, the secular equivalent of a great religious altarpiece. In this regard, it seems relevant that, in a commentary written later about the *Grande Jatte*, Seurat specifically linked its inception to a religious holiday, emphasizing that he began the studies *and* the painting proper on Ascension Thursday 1884.²⁵ In another statement, alluded to above, he described his artistic goal as that of depicting modern people moving about as they do on the frieze of the Parthenon, which portrays the annual sacred procession honoring the goddess Athena. This

greatest of Greek temples must have often been in Seurat's mind when he initiated his project; as Robert Herbert observed, the artist's treatment of the grove of trees on the *Grande Jatte* rendered in a beautiful drawing recently acquired by the Art Institute (p. 207, fig. 9), recalls the columns of the Parthenon, reminding us of the fact that, in the earliest Greek temples, such columns were actually created from tree trunks.²⁶

The similarities between the protagonists of the *Grande Jatte* and those depicted by Piero della Francesca in his frescoes at Arezzo have been widely recognized. However, the fact that Piero's paintings depict a deeply religious subject—the finding of the True Cross by the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine—is usually glossed over in favor of emphasizing the abstracting, geometricizing tendencies and mathematical concerns shared by the two artists.²⁷

Seurat's interest in the wonderful collection of Egyptian artifacts in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, also played an important role in the evolution of the *Grande Jatte*, whose figures have seemed to many observers virtually as hieratic as those found in Egyptian art. One might also note that the discrepancies in scale evident in Seurat's canvas recall the proportions of Egyptian art, where the pharaoh is invariably rendered as much larger than anyone else, while other individuals are graduated in size according to their rank and relationship to the ruler.²⁸ The fact that many of those paintings and reliefs depict personages on the shores of the Nile probably made such fragments doubly appealing to Seurat, engrossed as he was in portraying contemporary Parisians on the banks of the Seine. But the fact that virtually all of Egyptian art was deeply religious in character, designed to embellish temples and tombs, may also have played a major role in directing Seurat's attention to this rich source.²⁹

Although critics have not usually compared Seurat's personages to those depicted in Byzantine mosaics, similarities seem apparent. The way Seurat flattened bodies and reduced drapery folds to flat, linear details, rendered in stitchlike strokes, recalls corresponding characteristics in the treatment of figures at important Byzantine religious sites, such as Ravenna.³⁰

Despite the vast scope of his *Grande Jatte* project, Seurat completed the big painting in less than a year. He had it ready by March 1885 when it was scheduled to be included in the exhibition of the Indépendants, which was cancelled. After a summer on the sea coast, he re-

turned to his studio and to the *Grande Jatte*, which he reworked extensively between October 1885 and May 1886, when it was shown in the eighth, and final, Impressionist exhibition. During that winter and spring, he significantly modified several of the major figures (most notably the woman with the monkey and the woman fishing, whose bustles he updated according to styles depicted in the latest fashion broadsheets) and added the extensive veil of Pointillist dots that now covers much of the painting's surface.

Seurat's obsession with the *Grande Jatte* did not end with this second painting campaign; several years later, perhaps as late as 1890, he returned to the picture again, restretching the canvas to expose its virginal margins, on which he painted Pointillist borders in pigments different from those used in the original composition. Before making the latter changes, he evidently tried out his new idea on the final study (p. 195, fig. 26). This canvas too bears evidence of being restretched after its completion to provide space for a painted border similar to that enclosing the definitive version. Even more surprising, Seurat also later retouched at least one other preliminary study for the *Grande Jatte*.³¹

Between 1886 and 1888, the artist returned to the *Grande Jatte* in a more indirect manner, reproducing a large segment of the lower right quadrant of the picture in two versions of *The Models*, painted in 1886–87 (Philadelphia, Barnes Collection) and 1888 (pl. 5). The emotional investment in *The Models* that led him to create a second version correcting defects he perceived in the first of these compositions may have had its inception in a desire to disprove critical charges that the Pointillist technique could not be adapted to painting the nude. After the fact, Seurat apparently concluded that the Pointillist brushstrokes employed in the first version of *The Models* seemed too minute, and he created the second smaller, more luminous revision. His motivations for including the *Grande Jatte* in his representation of the models remains more mysterious. However, this gambit did provide Seurat with an opportunity to “correct” a problem that developed soon after he completed his second campaign on the *Grande Jatte*: the myriad orange and green dots he added to the painting at that time soon changed color and faded. The resulting imbalances destroyed Seurat's cherished ambition of providing viewers with unique sensations of optical luster.³² Reproducing that portion of the *Grande Jatte* in his next major picture permitted him to correct those

defects. In the exquisite final revision of *The Models*, the segment from the *Grande Jatte* appears as a shimmering mirage, less substantial than in its original conception, but far more luminous.³³ Seurat's continued preoccupation with the *Grande Jatte*, an obsession that seemingly prevailed throughout the remainder of his lifetime, reinforces the hypothesis that this picture—above and beyond all his other canvases—played a unique role, both in his artistic evolution and in his mental life.

The Iconography of the *Grande Jatte*

To be truly convincing, any symbolic interpretation of the *Grande Jatte* must account for its enduring broad appeal, the fact that it speaks with equal forcefulness to the general public and art professionals alike. Repeated informal observations and conversations with visitors to The Art Institute of Chicago admiring the picture suggest that many people relate to this painting on a deeply personal level, perhaps one with unconscious roots or ramifications. This conviction received additional confirmation a few years ago, when interviews with leading Chicago painters about the role the *Grande Jatte* had played in their careers revealed that a number of them associated the canvas with tender reminiscences of their personal past or family history.³⁴ Such associations must be evoked by qualities in this composition far removed from the arcane politico-economic and socio-iconographic readings of the *Grande Jatte* comprehended only by a small group of scholars.³⁵ Like valid scientific theories, convincing iconographic interpretations of masterpieces should possess a certain beauty, echoing, however dimly, the radiant character of the works they seek to explicate. Seurat's great painting elevates the responsive viewer to a reflective, contemplative—even spiritualized—state, far removed from concerns about the struggles of the proletariat in nineteenth-century France.

Apart from their seemingly forced character, these revisionist interpretations of the *Grande Jatte* typically require endowing certain protagonists in the painting with specific identifications or imputed characteristics. The complete absence of any secure documentation that might prove or disprove such contentions has resulted in insoluble scholarly squabbles involving selected key figures in the painting. Evidence implicit in other avant-garde pictures contemporary with the *Grande Jatte* sug-

gests that these supposed identifications are far less definitive than their inventors would have us believe. To illustrate this point, two examples have been selected here: the prominent reclining male figure, the so-called *canotier*, or rower, in the left foreground, as a member of the working class; and that of the fashionably dressed fisherwoman in the left center as a prostitute (fig. 1). Proponents of the lower-class status for the rower point to his sleeveless garb and sprawling position, which contrast so markedly with the formal clothing and hieratic poses assumed by most of the island's other inhabitants. But in Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (fig. 5), modeled on a group of his friends, he represented the male figures in costumes ranging from the strict attire of the standing gentleman in the background, shown in black top hat and suit, to the utter informality of the two young men lounging in the foreground, whose sleeveless jersey shirts mirror their more casual poses. These two men—usually identified as Gustave Caillebotte (straddling the chair), the well-to-do engineer, amateur painter, and patron of the Impressionists, and Alphonse Fornaise, Jr., the son of the proprietor of the restaurant where the luncheon took place—both belonged to the middle class. Indeed it is probably no exaggeration to describe Caillebotte as a member of the *haute bourgeoisie*.³⁶ The pictorial evidence supplied by Renoir's painting suggests that assigning class identifications to Seurat's personae on the basis of costumes or poses presents serious difficulties. Canoeing had become so popular in late-nineteenth-century France that both bourgeois and working-class men spent their leisure time in that sport, for which they all dressed with appropriate casualness.

Richard Thomson has identified the prominent woman shown fishing at the lower center of the *Grande Jatte* as a prostitute, citing as evidence numerous contemporary caricatures representing tarts as women who “fished” for men (a visual pun based on the similarity between the French terms for the verbs to fish, *pêcher*, and to sin, *pécher*).³⁷ In *The Pond at Montgeron* (fig. 7), one of four large canvases that Claude Monet painted in 1876 on commission from his patron Ernest Hoschedé, the artist included the sketchy figure of a woman who fishes in a pool, while children lounge nearby. Daniel Wildenstein suggested that she probably represents Alice Hoschedé, the wife of Monet's patron.³⁸ It is simply inconceivable that the artist would have portrayed a person of this status—a woman, moreover, with whom he



FIGURE 7. Claude Monet. *The Pond at Montgeron*, 1876. Oil on canvas; 17.2 × 19.3 cm. Leningrad, The Hermitage.

was rapidly becoming deeply emotionally involved himself—as a hooker. Clearly not all representations of fisherwomen from this period should be regarded as references to whores!

In her symposium presentation, Hollis Clayson offered a socio-political reading of the *Grande Jatte* as a

painted representation of the “deconstruction” of family life in late nineteenth-century France.³⁹ She cited as evidence the predominant number, scale, and location of unaccompanied women and children depicted in the picture, as contrasted with the smaller size and secondary roles accorded many of the male protagonists. She also

pointed out that Seurat represented only one complete nuclear family in the canvas, the relatively tiny group of mother, father, and baby portrayed in the distant center of the picture. This argument ignores evidence suggesting that Seurat's decision to emphasize female figures in the *Grande Jatte* may originally have been conceived primarily for artistic purposes. *Bathing, Asnières*, Seurat's first large-scale painting, completed just prior to the *Grande Jatte*, also shows contemporary Parisians enjoying themselves along the Seine. The fact that both canvases were once the same size (until the artist enlarged the *Grande Jatte* to add its painted border) and that their settings depict the same point on opposite banks of the river has led many critics to postulate that they originally shared a thematic program that subsequently lost importance as the *Grande Jatte* evolved (and acquired more and more personal meanings?).⁴⁰ If the two pictures once shared such a programmatic link, Seurat's decision to feature women and girls so prominently in the *Grande Jatte* becomes more understandable, because *Bathing* depicts only male figures, primarily adolescent boys, and the contrast would have provided artistic variety.

In her summary of Seurat's biography, Clayson did not mention the fact that the artist himself came from a broken family, for his father deserted his family physically and emotionally, if not financially, leaving the future artist to be raised in effect by his mother as a single parent. Her interpretation also ignored the fact that Seurat never represented intact family groups anywhere else in his oeuvre, except for the single instance in the *Grande Jatte*. Perhaps this omission reflected neither his sociological nor his political commitment, but the impact of those childhood experiences which deeply colored his adult artistic vision.⁴¹

Although this essay challenges the notion that Seurat intended to subvert his masterpiece into a painted polemic depicting either class struggles or family problems in late nineteenth-century France, it seems clear enough that he wanted the personae of the *Grande Jatte* to represent a broad range of contemporary Parisian types.⁴² However, the degree of abstraction, regulation, and idealization that he imposed upon his protagonists transcends their personal identities, setting them forever apart from mundane considerations of role or status. At its deepest level, the *Grande Jatte* represents the triumph of order over chaos, the re-emergence of a classical golden age in modern Paris, with people in contemporary garb replacing the Greek characters portrayed in

the seventeenth century by Nicolas Poussin and by Puvis de Chavannes in the nineteenth.⁴³

The artist evolved his idealized vision through a long series of preparatory drawings and paintings. Two splendid examples of this type in the Art Institute, a drawing and a little oil on panel, probably both executed on site, illustrate how the actual realities of the island and its visitors differed from Seurat's inner vision. A comparison of the early conté-crayon study of a tree on the island (p. 207, fig. 8) with the comparable detail in the final painting (pl. 2), shows how Seurat transformed the twisted tree he actually observed into a comely specimen, smoothing its cleft trunk and magically restoring its former symmetry by replacing a large missing limb recorded in the sketch only as a gaping wound. A vivid little oil sketch, formerly in the Block Collection (pl. 3), reflects the ambiance of the island on a particular day, with its unprepossessing populace spread willy-nilly about the terrain, like so many pebbles cast.

By contrast, in Seurat's definitive vision, all the protagonists appear glorified and carefully positioned, cocooned in the special, individual spaces the artist reserved for them in his painting. Except for the tiny family group with the baby portrayed in the distant center of the picture, no person interacts with another. Even those few figures who touch one another seem mutually oblivious. Nor do the characters engage the spectator; only two figures face us, the central woman and child, and they both have veiled features and indistinct glances. In his masterpiece, Seurat chose to avoid the confrontational atmosphere created by Manet in his *Luncheon*, in which the nude model stares us down; he abjured too the convivial hospitality of Monet's luncheon scene, in which the central female figure symbolically invites the viewer to join the party. Nor did Seurat choose to depict the kind of camaraderie and high spirits conveyed by Renoir's jolly group of rowers. Instead Seurat's protagonists seem lost in contemplation. Many of them gaze raptly toward the Seine, that watery artery pulsing through the heart of Paris. Like members of a devout congregation attending an outdoor mass, they seem caught up in a pantheistic homage to nature, paying silent tribute to the beauties of Paris and the delights of a perfect summer afternoon. Their meditation is characterized by a certain tempo, a silent music, supplied by the regular repetition of poses and shapes, curves, lines, and angles, presented in continually varied contexts that suggest analogies to the construction of symphonic music, with its recurring patterns of theme and variations.⁴⁴

Concluding Speculations and Summary

Like a god, Georges Seurat created his painted progeny in his own image. The isolated, meditative character of the personae of the *Grande Jatte* mirrors the artist's own withdrawn personality, just as their pantheistic homage to nature parallels his monotheistic worship of art. However, the psychological isolation of the figures in this picture can be found in paintings by Seurat from the beginning of his career. Even in those early oils on panel showing peasants working the fields side by side, the men never interact, apparently as unaware of one another as the fishermen represented in other panels casting their lines in unison but otherwise ignoring one another. Small wonder that in the only picture by Seurat



widely regarded as a self-portrait, *The Painter at Work* (fig. 8), the artist represented himself on a ladder (perhaps as he painted the *Grande Jatte*), with his back turned to the spectator.

In creating the numerous preparatory studies for the *Grande Jatte*, Seurat seemingly focused only on individuals who were actually unengaged with other island visitors at the time he captured them, or were at least represented by him in such a state of aloneness. A sole possible exception might be *The Snack* (fig. 9), a small panel painting that may or may not be a preparatory study for the *Grande Jatte*. It shows three little boys picnicking together, but even here the children, although physically close, really do not engage one another.

The psychological isolation that characterizes the personae of the *Grande Jatte* becomes even more marked in the canvases Seurat created subsequently. Although critics frequently contrast the stiffness of the populace of the *Grande Jatte* with the more tender, natural demeanor of the nudes represented in *The Models*, the isolation expressed here is no less strong, since the nudes are really the same model in three different poses (all based on great art of the past), and she does not interact with anyone, except the painted image of the woman with the monkey, reproduced from the *Grande Jatte*.⁴⁵

Seurat's treatment of his protagonists in other late works reflects the increasing emotional withdrawal that clouded his final years. As his artistic ideas and achievements gained currency among the small circle of avant-garde artists active in Paris and Brussels, he became ever more fearful that others would steal and cheapen the inventions that he regarded as his alone. As his paranoia congealed, he removed himself ever more from his peers, a distancing reflected in the marked physical and psychological isolation of the figures in *The Bridge and Quays at Port-en-Bessin* (1888; the Minneapolis Institute of Arts) and *Bridge at Courbevoie* (fig. 11). The elegiac twilight mood of *Bridge at Courbevoie* permeates several of Seurat's other late landscape paintings, recalling the similar feeling apparent in the final canvases of another short-lived artist, Caravaggio, a coincidence that makes one wonder whether both men might have experienced premonitions of their coming deaths.

FIGURE 8. Georges Seurat. *The Painter at Work*, c. 1884. Conté crayon on paper; 30.7 × 22.9 cm. The Philadelphia Museum of Art.

FIGURE 9. Georges Seurat. *The Snack*, c. 1885. Oil on panel; 15.5 × 24.7 cm. Great Britain, private collection. Photo: Hauke 1961, vol. 1, p. 97.



FIGURE 10. Claude Monet. *Monet's House at Argenteuil*, 1873. Oil on canvas; 60.2 × 73.3 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection (1933.1153).



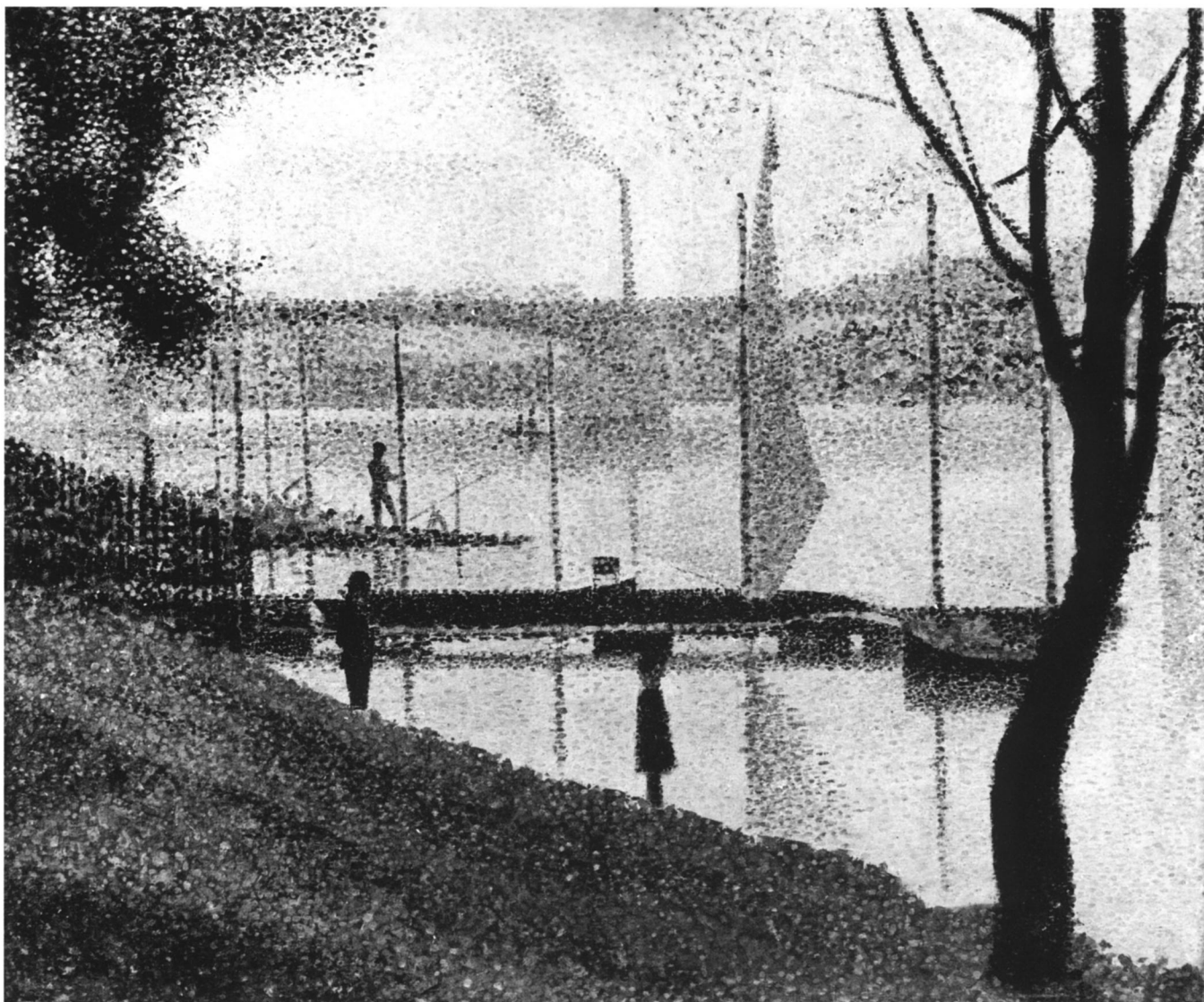


FIGURE 11. Georges Seurat. *Bridge at Courbevoie*, 1886–87. Oil on canvas; 46.4 × 55.3 cm. London, Courtauld Institute.

If the personae Seurat invented for the *Grande Jatte* collectively represent his emotional isolation, various individual figures from the ensemble refer more specifically to aspects of their creator's emotional life. Indeed, it seems likely that, as his work on the painting progressed, each of his characters—perhaps originally conceived in a spirit of greater neutrality—gradually acquired a unique personal significance for him that the fragmentary data available about his life permit us to reconstruct only in equally fragmentary ways. The

unique character of the little family group—the mother, father, and baby depicted interacting with one another in the remote center of the canvas—suggests that they probably possessed such meaning, perhaps recalling the distant days of the artist's own infancy, a halcyon period predating his father's quasi-psychotic withdrawal from his family. The images of the two cadets, based on a popular print depicting toy soldiers, may likewise refer to happy moments of early childhood.⁴⁶ The equation of the figure of the aged woman accompanied by the nurse with the artist's mother offered in the Sondheim musical interpretation of Seurat's life seems quite perceptive.⁴⁷ Does this grouping of the old lady and nurse convey his apprehension that he was destined to devote much of his

adult life to the care of a lonely, aging mother? (In this connection, it should be noted that the figure of the female nurse is widely believed to derive from the statues of male scribes so prevalent in Egyptian art.) Perhaps the child in white, shown at the exact center of the canvas, memorializes the little brother who died in early childhood. Had this child lived, he could have shared with Georges the burden of caring for his mother (represented here with the child as the more youthful figure she would have been at the time). The fact that the child wears a dress does not mean that the figure represents a girl; boys of that period wore dresses until they reached school age. A painting by Monet in the Art Institute, *Monet's House at Argenteuil* (fig. 10), shows his son, Jean, then about six years of age, wearing a white dress and hat remarkably similar to those of the central child in the *Grande Jatte*. One last speculation concerns the celebrated rower. Whomever else he may represent, perhaps he also symbolizes the artist's own, idealized alter-ego, the unrealized dream of a man who could never permit himself the relaxed, unconventional behavior of the painted figure shown taking his ease on the banks of the Seine.

If the protagonists of the *Grande Jatte* encode various highly personalized symbolic meanings, the formal aspects of the picture conceal messages just as personal. Art historians are accustomed to separating analysis of the formal structural elements of a painting from symbolic interpretations of its content. Within the oeuvre of a single artist, such distinctions do not exist; form and content contribute equally to the indissoluble whole that constitutes a personal iconography, and both are equally revealing of the private person, as well as the public artist. If the content of the *Grande Jatte* speaks to us of Seurat's personal relationships, past and present, its formal characteristics reveal his competitive ambitions, his dreams of artistic glory. The formal innovations of the *Grande Jatte* introduced an entirely new style of painting, refining and redefining Impressionism, reconciling

it with traditional picture making, while simultaneously transforming the academic approach by re-examining the entire issue of the relationship of the sketch to the finished painting.

With the creation of the *Grande Jatte*, the artist scored a resounding triumph over the Impressionists, especially over Monet, surely his foremost artistic competitor. But Seurat simultaneously achieved a still more definitive victory over his tyrannical father, a man whose example, as we have seen, imbued his son with an awareness of the importance of a methodical approach to life, while simultaneously serving as a constant reminder of the necessity for grounding one's dreams of achievement in vigorous preparation. Ever mindful of this example, the future artist prepared for his public career by undertaking a rigorous, self-designed apprenticeship before making his public debut as a painter. He extended the same careful procedures to the creation of the *Grande Jatte*, which evolved into its definitive form with the aid of dozens of preparatory drawings and sketches.

The fact that the picture indirectly alludes to so many great religious works of the past suggests that, from the beginning, it assumed special spiritual connotations in the mind of its creator. The religious aspects of the composition became increasingly important as the picture progressed, and by the time Seurat applied the topmost layer of Pointillist dots to the painting, each stroke had assumed the character of a ritualistic gesture imbued with a holy quality. This underlying spirituality of the *Grande Jatte*, however, did not translate itself into overt religious imagery; rather it is reflected in the meditative nature of the canvas and the hieratic, processional character of its protagonists. In creating this great painting, the artist replaced his father's sterile religious enactments with creative new rites that elevated the process of picture making to the level of sacred ritual and the role of the artist himself to that of the high priest of a new religion.⁴⁸

40. Fourier, *Le Nouveau Monde amoureux*, ed. by S. Debout-Oleszkiewicz (Paris, 1957).

41. Anthony Vidler, *The Writings of the Walls: Architectural Theory in the Late Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1987), p. 112, which includes a discussion of Fourier's utopia.

Gedo, "The *Grande Jatte* as the Icon of a New Religion: A Psycho-Iconographic Interpretation," pp. 223–37.

My understanding of the *Grande Jatte* has been deepened by long discussions with leading Chicago painters, especially William Conger, Barbara Rossi, and Robert Skaggs. Conversations with Eva Masur, who shared her deep knowledge of the French language and culture with me, also informed this essay. John Larson, Museum Archivist at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, also graciously answered my many questions about specific images in ancient Egyptian art related to those in the *Grande Jatte*.

It should be noted that references to the ideas of Hollis Clayson and Richard Thomson contained in this essay are based on the papers they presented at the symposium, "Seurat and *La Grande Jatte*: The New Scholarship," May 15–16, 1987, The Art Institute of Chicago. To compare the versions cited here with the definitive essays, the reader should consult the relevant footnotes for page citations to this issue of *Museum Studies*.

1. Russell 1965, p. 156.

2. For the quintessential Marxist interpretation, see Clark 1984, pp. 260–67.

3. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1962), pp. 11–16.

4. Dorra and Rewald 1959 included important critical writings about the artist, most notably all the relevant material from the publications of Félix Fénéon. See "Félix Fénéon: *Ecrits sur Georges Seurat*," pps. xi–xxxi. See also pp. 139–64 for excerpts from critical comments dealing specifically with the *Grande Jatte*.

See also Ward 1986, pp. 414–38. She reviewed the critical responses to the *Grande Jatte* at the time of its initial exhibition, as part of an attempt to evaluate Clark's interpretation of the painting. She commented: "Clark's own reading of the image in these terms [i.e., that the populace Seurat depicted in the painting showed the nature of class distinctions in contemporary France, as embodied in the transient population of the *Grande Jatte*] is compelling and convincing, but his claim for the criticism in 1886 is puzzling. For what seems hard to grasp is why critics, with the exception of Christophe [the only critic who claimed that Seurat intended 'to seize the diverse attitudes of age, sex, and social class: elegant men and women, soldiers, nannies, bourgeois, workers' and called it 'a brave effort'], were not attentive to the blatant juxtapositions in Seurat's painting. At best, reviewers scanned the population and took note of the various types, disregarding the order of their placement in the image" (p. 435). Ward also pointed out that, in a later (1890) publication, Christophe altered his comments about the *Grande Jatte*, omitting the catalogue of types mentioned in his review of 1886 (p. 434).

5. See Broude 1978 for many contemporary descriptions of the artist's appearance and behavior, especially Broude's selection of "Witness Accounts (Including Reported Statements by Seurat),"

pp. 20–35. For another, much briefer selection of similar comments, see Courthion 1968, pp. 9–10.

6. Degas's witticism has been widely quoted; see Gustave Kahn's comments about it in Kahn 1971, pp. 8–9.

7. Reprinted in Broude 1978, p. 34.

8. Herbert 1962, pp. 7–11, provided details about Seurat's life not mentioned by other sources. See also Russell 1965, pp. 9–14.

9. Minervino 1972, p. 85, listed the birth and death years for the artist's parents and siblings, but neither this text nor that of Dorra and Rewald 1959, p. lxxxvii, gives the exact month and day of the brother's death; Rewald stated that the boy died when he was five and a half, so Seurat, born at the end of 1859, was probably not yet nine at the time.

10. The fragmentary information we possess concerning Madeleine Knobloch suggests that she was of lower-class origin. After Seurat's death, she tried to establish herself in Brussels as a milliner, but no one knows whether she had actually practiced this trade earlier. Although Seurat's mother must have been deeply shocked by her son's inappropriate choice of a mistress, she and other members of the artist's family behaved with the utmost generosity toward the girl and gave her half of Seurat's oeuvre. For an account of her subsequent behavior, see Rewald 1978, pp. 394–96 and nn. 83, 84. This description suggests that Knobloch either possessed a particularly vicious character, or was extremely disturbed, or both. Shortly after the artist's death, she traveled to Brussels to present works to Belgian colleagues whom Seurat's family had designated to receive these artistic mementos. In Brussels "she was able to obtain money from [the critic Gustave] Kahn to whom she said that the painter's friends were conniving to 'despoil' her of his works; she accused [Paul] Signac of having but one design, that of 'burying his rival,' Seurat, and [Maximilien] Luce of having finished Seurat's *Cirque* [*The Circus*, the artist's final picture, left incomplete at his death]." Knobloch soon returned to Paris, where she continued to spread untrue rumors and cause trouble. Signac deplored her "idle talk and lies, like those of a crazy concierge . . ." (all quotations from Rewald 1978, p. 396).

11. See Russell 1965, p. 23; and Herbert 1962, p. 9. Russell stated that the father lost his right hand, but Herbert identified it as the left.

12. Arsène Alexandre for example described Seurat as possessing "the gentleness of a girl," as being peaceable, but stubborn and determined. See Courthion 1968, p. 9.

13. Descriptions of Seurat senior's behavior suggest that he probably suffered from an encapsulated psychosis, perhaps of a well-defended paranoid type. People with such a disorder may seem perfectly rational or logical in dealing with day-to-day situations that do not involve their delusional systems. The elder Seurat was apparently a shrewd and successful businessman, whose bizarre thought and behavior patterns became really apparent only when he discussed religion and carried out his bizarre rituals and practices. His attempts to assume the rights and rites of the priesthood would certainly have been considered sacrilegious by the Roman Catholic church and would seem to reflect his underlying grandiose paranoid ideas. In this regard, it might be noted that Herbert reported that he always insisted upon being addressed by the pretentious title "Mon-sieur l'Officier Ministériel." See Herbert 1962, p. 9.

14. See *ibid.*, pp. 110–13, for Herbert's excellent discussion of the influence of "primitive" art on Seurat's style. He mentioned correla-

tions between the artist's collection of popular broadsides and the appearance of certain figures in the *Grande Jatte*.

15. Cited in Broude 1978, p. 31.

16. See John Rewald's "Artists' Quarrels (including letters by Pissarro, Signac, Seurat, and Hayet, 1887–1890)," in Broude 1978, pp. 103–107. This material, originally published in Rewald 1943, appears in English for the first time in Broude 1978. See also Rewald 1978, who wrote: "Feeling either continually crushed by Seurat's superiority and his insistence upon it, or else being dissatisfied with his theories, several of his associates now began to abandon his group. Seurat may actually have welcomed some of these defections . . ." (p. 388). In a personal letter to Rewald, dated Jan. 17, 1950, the artist-architect Henry van de Velde related that he eventually became so disillusioned by the artist's "distrustfulness and meanness" that he came to doubt the rightness of Seurat's artistic views (pp. 388, 404 n. 69). In light of Seurat's attitudes, it seems likely that the false rumors and outright lies spread by Madeleine Knobloch following his death represented her ill-digested version of the artist's own misperceptions of the behavior of his colleagues.

17. Clark 1984, pp. 263, 315 n. 9. In Ward's discussion of these issues (Ward 1986), she commented that Clark's assertion is "undoubtedly true, and yet it is also important to emphasize that Seurat himself, from all reports, talked obsessively about his artistic theories, virtually to the exclusion of all other issues" (p. 436). Since the evidence Ward brought to bear consistently fails to support Clark's thesis, one cannot help but wonder why she kept politely insisting that it must be valid. For an argument in favor of Seurat as an anarchist, see Herbert and Herbert 1960, esp. p. 480. For an effective counter argument, see House 1980, esp. pp. 345–50. Reviewing the few recorded comments by Signac, Fénéon, and Kahn that impute anarchist motives to Seurat, House noted: "Since Seurat's friends had lost a leader through his death, it is understandable that they tended to assimilate his views, whatever they had been, with their own in support of their own causes. The surviving evidence is certainly not enough to justify an anarchist reading of the *Baignade* [*Bathing*] and the *Grande Jatte* . . ." (p. 349).

18. See Herbert 1962, p. 168 n. 35, regarding the history of Seurat's remark about the Parthenon frieze.

19. Rich 1935 correctly decried the tendency of "certain students of modern art . . . to underrate Seurat's debt to Monet. Though he did not know the painting of Monet, or that of Renoir, Sisley, and Pissarro until after 1882, it is significant that the moment he comes into contact with their art his own deepens and grows more positive" (p. 43).

20. For a complete listing of the 179 paintings shown, see Paris, Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts, *Exposition des oeuvres d'Edouard Manet*, pref. by Emile Zola (Paris, 1884).

21. See Joel Isaacson, *Monet: Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (New York, 1972), p. 95 n. 2. Monet left the canvas with his landlord, Alexandre Flament, at Argenteuil in January 1878, in lieu of payments for rental of a home previously occupied by the artist.

22. Whether Monet executed the sketch for the *Luncheon* primarily outdoors remains a complex, unresolved question, too tangential to the concerns of this essay to air here. Nor does this essay address the question of Manet's intentions in introducing the ambiguities in figure-ground integration and the depiction of depth and aerial perspective apparent in his version of the *Luncheon*. Whether these

features reflect Manet's conscious plan is irrelevant here. More to the point is the fact that Manet evidently regarded them as defects which his more realistic depiction would "correct."

23. The most thorough discussion of the scientific basis of Seurat's painting can be found in Homer 1970, esp. pp. 112–54. Gage 1987 presented a dissenting view. The Golden Section, or Golden Number, provides a way to compose pictures according to mathematical formulae, used to determine axes about which the artist can locate the figures in his compositions. For a detailed account of Seurat's use of the Golden Section, see Dorra and Rewald 1959, pp. lxxix–cvi, esp. lxxvi–vii. See also Roger Herz-Fishler, "Examination of Claims Concerning Seurat and 'The Golden Number,'" *Gazette des beaux-arts*, ser. 6, 101, 1370 (Mar. 1983), pp. 109–12.

24. Kahn 1971 stated that Seurat "was a student at the peripatetic museum—the exhibitions of the Impressionist painters . . ." (p. 5). Writing about Paul Gauguin's 1880 statuette *Woman on a Stroll* (*The Little Parisienne*), Charles Stuckey suggested that the rigid poses adopted by Gauguin in this sculpture and by Edgar Degas in his similar wax figurine *The Schoolgirl*, dated c. 1880, "surely influenced Seurat, whose own drawings of archaically columnar figures from modern life are generally dated around 1882." See Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Washington, D. C., National Gallery of Art, and The Art Institute of Chicago, *Gauguin*, exh. cat. by Richard Brettell, Françoise Cachin, Claire Frèches-Thory, Charles F. Stuckey, and Peter Zegers (Washington, D. C., 1988), no. 6 p. 21. Gauguin's statuette was exhibited in the Impressionist group show of 1881.

25. See Seurat's letter to Fénéon of June 20, 1890, cited in Dorra and Rewald 1959, p. xxvii n. 34.

26. Herbert 1962, p. 110.

27. Good copies of Piero's Arezzo frescos were readily available to Seurat. Created by Charles Lazeux in 1872–73, they were installed in the chapel of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, by the time Seurat enrolled there in 1878–79. See Albert Boime, "Seurat and Piero della Francesca," *The Art Bulletin* 47 (June 1965), pp. 265–71, abridged and reprinted in Broude 1978, pp. 156–62; Boime did not mention the religious connotations of the paintings.

28. For a very different interpretation of the origin of these discrepancies, see Richard Thomson, "The *Grande Jatte*: Notes on Drawing and Meaning," in the present issue, p. 188.

29. It should be noted that simians appear in genre scenes as well as religious representations in ancient Egyptian art. In the latter depictions, monkeys are shown in offering and funeral scenes, typically nibbling on fruit, seated beneath the chair of a banqueter.

But baboons also appear in Old Kingdom genre scenes, performing chores or being led on leashes, like modern dogs. For an example showing leashed baboons see the illustrations in Frank Yurcos "The Ancient Egyptian Marketplace," *The Field Museum of Natural History Bulletin* 60, 2 (1989), pp. 12–16. Seurat was far from alone in turning both to the Italian "Primitives" and to ancient Egyptian art for inspiration. Other avant-garde artists of the period also mined these rich sources as part of the growing movement away from the High Renaissance tradition of picture making.

30. One wonders whether Seurat might also have been influenced in the development of Pointillism by the regular, repetitive shapes of the tiny tesserae of the Byzantine mosaics, with their glowing surfaces.

31. See the catalogue entries in Dorra and Rewald 1959, no. 116 pp. 124–25; no. 138 pp. 150–51; no. 139 p. 165, describing these changes. For a discussion of these problems, see Inge Fiedler, “A Technical Evaluation of the *Grande Jatte*,” in the present issue, pp. 176, 178–79.
32. For a detailed discussion of the meaning of optical luster and optical mixture, see Homer 1970, pp. 1–12, 131–64.
33. It seems likely that this picture-within-a-picture possessed some special significance for Seurat. The provocative juxtaposition of the virginal nude with the elegantly dressed woman portrayed in the *Grande Jatte* recalls a similar pairing in Titian’s *Sacred and Profane Love* (Rome, Galleria Borghese). For an illustration of the latter and a discussion of its symbolism, see Harold E. Wethey, *Titian: The Mythological and Historical Paintings* (London, 1975), pp. 20–21, pl. 20.
34. The author conducted interviews with more than a dozen leading painters during the winter of 1985–86 in preparation for a small exhibition honoring the centenary of the *Grande Jatte* by examining its impact on current Chicago painting. This exhibition, “The Grand Example of *La Grande Jatte*,” opened at the Roy Boyd Gallery on May 18, 1986. For a more complete discussion of this topic, see the exhibition catalogue, as well as the related essay, “Chicago Artists Celebrate ‘La Grande Jatte,’” *New Art Examiner* 13, 7 (Mar. 1986), pp. 26–28.
35. Certainly none of the artists interviewed suggested any reading of this type, though a number of them had literally spent years studying the painting in intimate detail and probably know it better than many art historians. See Gedo (note 34).
36. Seurat introduced significant changes in the figure of the rower between the time he completed the final study and the definitive painting. In the study, the figure appears less prominent in size and wears a long-sleeved red sweater or jacket and a bowler hat. One wonders whether Seurat saw Renoir’s *Luncheon* again between the time he worked on the study and completed the painting proper and was so impressed with the Impressionist artist’s depiction of the two young rowers that he introduced changes in his reclining man. It is also quite possible that these changes reflect a more personal valence the image acquired for Seurat as the painting progressed.
In his *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven and London, 1988), which appeared after this essay had gone to press, Robert Herbert also observed that “the contrast of male types (in Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party*) foretells Seurat’s *Sunday on the Island of the Grand Jatte* of 1886.”
37. See Thomson (note 28), pp. 186–87.
38. Daniel Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: biographie et catalogue raisonné*, vol. 1 (Lausanne and Paris, 1974), no. 420 p. 296. In 1885, in an effort to find a subject that would appeal to his dealer more than his recent landscapes had, Renoir planned a painting of a young woman fishing. Eager to please Durand-Ruel’s wealthy customers, the artist most assuredly did not intend that this composition be interpreted as a reference to prostitution. The drawing for this unrealized project survives, depicting a typically wholesome Renoir girl, who exudes the innocent eroticism he portrayed so masterfully. For the relevant passage from Renoir’s letter to his dealer and an illustration of the drawing, see Barbara Erlich White, *Renoir: His Life, Art, and Letters* (New York, 1984), pp. 157–58.
39. (Ed. note: The term “deconstruction” has not been used by Clayson in the written version of her symposium lecture; see S. Hollis Clayson, “The Family and the Father: The *Grande Jatte* and its Absences,” in the present issue, pp. 155–64.)
40. For an interesting hypothesis about the possible reasons for the contrasts between the personae of these two paintings, see House 1980, pp. 346–49; and idem, “Reading the *Grande Jatte*,” in the present issue, pp. 125–29.
41. In a perception that seemed deliberately idiosyncratic, Clayson characterized the *Grande Jatte* in her lecture as a very sad picture. In a recent review, Carol Zemel alluded to the “social optimism” reflected in the *Grande Jatte*, an assessment quite different from Clayson’s. See Zemel’s assessment of Diane Lesko’s monograph, *James Ensor, The Creative Years*, in *The Art Bulletin* 70, 1 (Mar. 1988), p. 156.
42. In creating his range of types, Seurat may have been influenced by earlier paintings such as Annibale Carracci’s *Hunting and Fishing*, already in the collection of the Musée du Louvre, Paris, in Seurat’s time. As Robert Cafritz points out, these paired pictures—in which the personae play a central role, depict “an engaging, heterogenous mixture of social classes”; *Fishing*, with its riverbank setting might have been of special interest to Seurat. See Cafritz’s essay, “Classical Revision of the Pastoral Landscape” in Washington, D.C., The Phillips Collection in association with the National Gallery of Art, *Places of Delight: The Pastoral Landscape*, exh. cat. (1988), pp. 87, 91–2, figs. 84–5. In his essay “The Modern Vision” in the same catalogue, Lawrence Gowing classifies Seurat as a latter-day pastoral painter, an identification which seems incompatible with the reading of the *Grande Jatte* proposed by Clark and others, p. 283.
43. The fact that Seurat included personae whose ages ranged from that of the babe in arms to the elderly woman with the nurse companion suggests that he intended at least a passing reference to the ages of man, that time-honored concept so often depicted in paintings from the Renaissance onward. If so, Seurat updated the reference in a way that would please modern-day feminists, for he substituted female protagonists for the male figures so often used to symbolize these stages.
44. See p. 142, figs. 10a–b for the diagrammatic presentation in Rich 1935 of the principal curves, lines, and angles in the picture.
45. One should note however that the greater sensuality and immediacy apparent in *The Models* reveal that Seurat was not so withdrawn as to be unresponsive to the erotic pull of the female nude, a responsiveness even more obvious in the late drawing of a fleshy reclining woman (present whereabouts unknown), probably modeled after Madeleine Knobloch. See Hauke 1961, vol. 2, no. 660, pp. 236–37.
46. Herbert 1962 mentioned the connection between Seurat’s cadet figures and “the sheets of [images] of toy soldiers he had in his studio” (pp. 110–11).
47. The musical production *Sunday in the Park with George* presents a quasi-fictional account of the creation of the *Grande Jatte* which stresses Seurat’s personal relationship with his protagonists, including the figure of the old woman with the nurse. The play, with music and lyrics by Sondheim and book by James L. Lapine et al., opened in New York at the Booth Theater on April 23, 1984.
48. On the topic of the artist as priest, see Jacques Barzac, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), pp. 26–42.