Georges Seurat

Working with Color
On May 15, 1884, an art exhibition opened in an unused post office hidden behind the largest art museum in Paris. The members of the show's hanging committee considered one painting too large, or possibly too strange, to put in the exhibition rooms.

So the work on the right, done by 24-year-old Georges Seurat (George Sur-rah), ended up in a dark corner where it was overlooked by most people. Today, over a century later, this painting—Seurat's The Bathers—is considered to be one of the most important works in modern art.

At the end of the 19th century, Paris was the center of the art world. At that time art was controlled by a powerful organization, the French Academy, and artists had to follow strict rules to get their work shown. A group of artists known as Impressionists were inventing fresh new ways of painting the world around them, emphasizing color and light in their work. These young painters, like Seurat, were defying the Academy and were setting up their own art exhibitions.

Georges Seurat was born in Paris in 1859. His father, a local official, was so secretive and solitary that he lived by himself in his own house, only visiting his family once in a while. Seurat, his mother, and his sister stayed in the family apartment a few miles away. Much of Seurat's free time during his childhood was spent in the many suburban parks in his neighborhood. Seurat graduated from the local high school, then went on to art school. After serving in the army, he returned to Paris, where he set up a studio and began painting the scenes he saw around him.

There were several places on the banks of the river, just outside the city, where Seurat and other Parisians went on weekends. But while most people brought picnic baskets or bathing suits, Seurat brought his sketchbook. He made many drawings, then took them back to his studio and used them to compose a large canvas. Seurat wanted to capture the feeling of a long, lazy Sunday afternoon in a way that would seem more real than the actual scene. He noticed that when the Impressionists wanted a color to appear brighter, they would use small strokes of the color's opposite (green's opposite is red; blue's is orange; purple's is yellow).

If you look closely at the cover, the grass in The Bathers is actually made up of small yellow and blue brushstrokes. Seen from a distance, it looks green. When Seurat added strokes of green's complementary (opposite)—red—the resulting "after-image" makes the grass appear to shimmer and wave in the breeze. In this work, Seurat used brightly colored marks to develop Pointillism—the style of painting for which he became famous.
Six years after graduating from high school, Georges Seurat created this painting—one of the most famous images in modern art.
"Imagine a tall young man, extremely shy but with great energy . . . working with incredible intensity, shut up in his tiny studio, using what little money he has to buy expensive books instead of food."

This was the way a contemporary of Georges Seurat's described the artist and his lifestyle.

Do the people in it seem to be having a good time? Do they look friendly or happy?

Seurat found that certain color combinations produced certain feelings—bright, warm colors make the viewer happy, while dark, cool colors can cause feelings of depression. In The Side Show, Seurat used color to create a melancholy, detached mood. The painting is a brownish monochrome made up of green, yellow, orange, and blue dots and simplified, stylized shapes. Those shapes that can be read as figures are flat, vertical, two-dimensional silhouettes. Seurat's simplified, minimal forms can be seen as setting the stage for much 20th-century abstract art.

---

*Arsène Alexandre, 1891

Can you figure out the "color formula" Seurat used to create The Side Show (right) by looking at a detail shown on the left?

"Everything about this painting was so new — especially the color technique that nobody had ever seen or heard of before. So this was the famous Pointillism."

— ARSÈNE ALEXANDRE, 1891
Georges Seurat had no sooner become well known for his first large painting *The Bathers* than he shut himself up again with an even bigger canvas. He left his studio only to do sketches for his next project, a complex figure composition. He decided to place his figures on a grassy island outside Paris, where people gathered on weekends.

Seurat wanted to create a painting made up of tiny brushstrokes of bright color placed so close together the eye would mix them optically. Blue strokes next to yellow strokes would—from a distance—appear as a vivid green. The artist made many paintings before doing the final version of *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (pages 8-9).

Can you pick out the major *bands of light and dark* in the painting? The people in the foreground—all seen from the side—are in deep shadow. The figures in the bright middle-ground are seen from many *points of view*. The woman and girl in the center are seen from eye level while other figures appear from above, giving a *flat, two-dimensional* feeling.

Seurat hung this enormous canvas on his studio wall, standing on ladders in order to cover it with thousands of dots of paint. He developed a whole *range of marks*—dots, *commas*, bars, *slashes*, and *swirls*. Most painters found it hard to work by artificial light, but since Seurat knew exactly what he was going to do, he could work all day, then on through the night. He worked like this for two years, "seeing and speaking to no one."

Seurat finished his painting just in time for the Impressionist exhibit of 1886. To add to its optical effect, he added a frame using complementary color dots. *La Grande Jatte* was greeted with mixed reviews. It took some years for this haunting work with its mysterious figures and timeless atmosphere to be accepted as one of the great creations of modern art.

For the next five years Seurat painted constantly, becoming increasingly isolated. In March 1891, the artist was hanging an exhibition of his paintings. Nine days later, he was dead of an unidentified illness at the age of 31.

George Seurat's artistic career lasted barely a dozen years, during which he created six major paintings (three are shown in this issue).
A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte
"The river, the women's dresses, the sails of the boats, all the reflections came crowding into this square panel of beauty cut out of a marvellous afternoon — the motion of the hours at this luminous instant had been arrested for all time."

— MARCEL PROUST
**Shimmering Faces**

What do contemporary American Chuck Close’s huge painted faces (above) have to do with Georges Seurat’s landscapes created over a century ago? Compare the detail from Seurat’s painting (page 4) with Close’s Eric. Do you see any similarities?

Chuck Close’s painting methods could be called a modern version of Seurat’s Pointillism (see page 2). While Seurat built his images with color dots, Close uses a grid to enlarge his heads, dividing the features into small squares. For the past 20 years, Close has become known for the huge faces he slowly and carefully constructs square by square. Only recently has color become an important element in his work. In 1989, the artist became partially paralyzed. Suddenly he was unable to use his hands. Sitting in a wheelchair, a brace on his arm and a brush strapped to it, he began learning to paint again. If you look at Eric, you can see that each square is a small abstract painting made up of three or four colors. Changes in the color’s value (lightness and darkness) suggest highlights and shadows.

Like Seurat, Close’s marks fit his subject—calm patterns made up of circles, curves, and warm, restful colors portray quiet, thoughtful personalities. Angular shapes and bright, clashing colors are used for nervous, excitable types.

"I build a painting by putting little marks together — some look like hot dogs, some like doughnuts."
— Chuck Close

Chuck Close b 1940. Eric, 1990. 100" x 84" Pace Wildenstein Gallery, NY, NY.
Strokes of Color

Seurat's paintings were made up of small color dots, but his images were always recognizable. Does the work (left) by 20th-century African-American artist Alma Thomas remind you of anything? Maybe the title will give you some ideas.

This painting is almost completely nonrepresentational. In it, Thomas has used color brushstrokes to communicate her inner emotions. For 35 years, Alma Thomas taught high school art while doing her own realistic paintings. At the age of 74, inspired by the holly tree outside her window, she took a canvas and began to make small strokes of bright color. Thomas had known this tree for years—her responses to it were deeply felt. She painted the shapes of the leaves and the patterns of light and shade they cast.

To create Red Rose Cantata, the artist used form and design qualities to suggest natural images. Her monochromatic (one color) shapes—dots, commas, slashes, wedges—stand for the shapes roses take turning from bud to blossom. The white negative spaces between the brushstrokes suggest sunlight flickering through red rose petals. The strokes are set in vertical lines like flowers in a formal garden.

Like Seurat, Alma Thomas used color to express what she felt rather than what she saw. Also like Seurat, Thomas's painting career lasted only a dozen years, until her death in 1978.

Colors of Life

Mexican-American artist Carlos Almaraz used strokes of clashing color opposites to express his conflict about growing up in two cultures.

Born in Mexico City, Almaraz came to the U.S. and lived in various sections of Los Angeles, never settling in one place for very long. His paintings reflect the way the artist felt about the landscape and culture of the Southwest. Do the long, horizontal shapes broken by vertical slashes and the violent color contrasts of the image on the left give you any clues as to what the work is about? Does looking at the title make the subject any clearer?

In the early 1980s, Almaraz did a number of paintings he called his "car crash series." The cars in Crash in Phthalo Green, speeding down a highway surrounded by sharp, angular mountain peaks and a flaming sunset, capture the angry violence of today's freeway culture. The exploding automobiles seem to resemble wild animals racing through the desert landscape. The electric, day-glow color opposites—bloodred, and garish green, burnt orange and midnight blue—and the thick, expressive strokes Almaraz has used add to the horror of this scene.

The artist once said, "Lately I paint with a new passion, trying to deny the fact that I too will someday pass on and the only thing remaining will be the images I leave behind." His paintings comment on the speed and excitement of contemporary urban life, as well as the constant threat of danger and violence.
John Zeigler was a 17-year-old senior at Lorain Catholic High School in Ohio when he made the colorful Scholastic Art Award-winning painting on the opposite page. Now just beginning his first year at the University of Toledo, John wants to major in civil engineering. He says, “I plan to pursue art as a hobby, and I might also use it in my engineering work. I enjoy art. I find it relaxing to sit back and draw.”

We select our Artist of the Month from among Scholastic Award winners. To enter, ask your teacher to write to the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, 550 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-3999 for entry deadlines and rules books. Scholastic Art magazine does not have a separate competition.

- How did you get started in art? I had a lot of art in grade school. I took a class in high school and, when I saw I actually had some drawing talent, I took another one.

- How did you come to create this Scholastic Art Award-winning work? We hadn’t done much with paint yet, so this was a class assignment to introduce us to color and acrylic paint. We were to take a piece of poster board with a picture on it and paint it, using different colors, strokes, and brushwork. The only limitation was that we could use only three colors and white.

- Where did you get your idea? I began painting, and ideas started to come to me while I was working. I wanted to use as much color as I could, and I wanted to compose the image to make it clearer.

- How did you go about that? The first thing I did was try to break the picture down into different components. There were ceilings and walls, but they were all covered with lights. I wanted the man to be the focal point of the picture, and I wanted the stairs and the railing to lead your eye up to him. I wanted the neon designs to form patterns that would frame the man. To make the neon seem really bright, I tried to break the lights down into their respective colors. The green lights were yellow and blue; the orange lights were red and yellow; and the pinkish lights were red and white.

- Then what did you do? After painting the lights, I started doing the stairs and the hallway. The painting was pretty dark so the stairs would stand out—in fact, your eye goes there first. I had used orange for most of the painting, so I did the stairs in yellow. I mixed white with the yellow so they looked even brighter. Finally I painted the man. In the original picture, he was just kind of back there. I wanted my composition to lead your attention up the stairs right to his figure. I made his face yel-
low and his features a reddish color, so he looks bright orange.

- **When did you know you were finished?**
  I had a feeling I was done, so I stopped. Sometimes you try to do too much, and you mess up your painting. I liked what I saw, which was unusual. I usually don't like my art pieces. I liked the intensity of the different color marks. I thought the painting looked psychedelic.

- **Why did you use such small color brushstrokes?**
  I wanted to capture the effect of neon lights, so I used a tiny brush to try to reproduce a pin-point-sized laser effect.

- **Why did you choose the colors you did?**
  I chose them because of their brightness. The original picture was dark and I felt bright colors would make the images stand out. So I worked with the primaries—red, yellow, and blue.

- **Did you like working with paint and color?**
  I really like the bold colors you can get in painting. Paint is more expressive than pastel or colored pencils. I found ideas came to me a little easier than they usually do. There were more possibilities with paint.

- **Do you have any advice for other artists?**
  There are kids I know who want to be artists. Sometimes I think they try too hard to make something really, really profound every time. I've found that art is a process that, if you let it happen, it will. I guess I'd say to relax when you do your art, and enjoy the process.
Earlier in this issue you saw a number of Georges Seurat's most famous figure compositions. You also learned how he used his new color technique—called Pointillism—to bring his figures to life. The artist also flattened and stylized his subjects to further emphasize the qualities of color and light.

In this workshop, you'll have a chance to use some of Seurat's ideas to create your own colorful figure drawing.

Materials
- No. 2 school pencil
- Vinyl eraser
- 18" x 24" 60-80 lb. white sulfite paper
- Drawing Board
- Pastels (12 color set)
- Paper Towels
- Hairspray or plastic art fixative (inexpensive hair spray works as well as expensive fixative and is less toxic)
Starting Out

1. Pose two student models, emphasizing definite profiles that are easy to draw. Simple props can be added. Lighting from back or front can help emphasize silhouettes. Make several very light contour drawings, stressing silhouettes and flat, two-dimensional shapes. Change your location after each drawing so you can work from different angles. Remember to simplify and rearrange shapes.

Step 2.

Select your best composition for the final pastel drawing. Limit the number of colors you use. Red, orange, and yellow are warm colors; blue, green, and purple are cool. Red and green are color opposites. So are blue and orange as well as purple and yellow. Red, orange, and yellow are related colors. Blue, green, and purple are also related. Adding white to a color makes it lighter in value; adding black makes it darker in value.

Step 3.

Pastels can be blended, but for this project, you'll mix your colors visually as Seurat did, by placing small marks of color next to each other. Decide on the kind of texture or texture combinations you think will work best. Do you want to use dots, dashes, swipes, scribbles, or lines? Will your lines be thick, thin, long, short, curved, straight, up and down, sideways, diagonal, close together or far apart?

Remember to work carefully with pastels. Do not blow, as colors will smear. Your finished figures should not look "real." Emphasis should be on arrangement of simplified color shapes.

When complete, fix your drawing in a well-ventilated area.

Some Solutions

In which of these works (left) has the artist combined small color marks to make a new color? Who has used dots; who used lines? Can you find other kinds of color marks? Who used horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines? Do any marks suggest movement? In which drawings has the artist used flat silhouettes? Have any used outlines? Can you find a work that contains at least two color opposites; at least two related colors? How have some of the artists used the white paper to create new colors? Have any artists combined warm colors; cool colors? How has each artist used color value? In which work are all the colors the same value?
You've probably never seen these three paintings before. Can you identify each artist?

Museum curators and critics have to identify and judge art every day. They do this based on what they know about art and on other works by the same artist.

Here are three examples of works by painters whose art appears in this issue. Can you name the artist? Which characteristics (subject, style, technique, brushstroke, use of color) made you recognize each?

A. Artist ______ Explain ______________________
B. Artist ______ Explain ______________________
C. Artist ______ Explain ______________________

Fill in the letter and the art term that applies.

In ___, the color scheme made up of a single color is called _____________.

___ is an example of the 19th-century color technique known as _____________.

In ___, changes in the color’s ____________ suggest highlights and shadows.

There are two complementary (opposite) colors in ___. 
___ has at least one warm color in it.

At least one __ color can be found in ___.
The colors in ___ are based on a grid.
The colors and shapes in ___ are nonrepresentational.