

## George Seurat - A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte

by Elena Pretty



In this essay, I will describe what the painting 'A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte' is all about. I will examine and analyse the painting to provide you with an informed interpretation and description.

The painting 'Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte' is one of George Seurat's most famous works. La Grande Jatte, in English means the large bowl. It was painted in 1884-1886 and is located in the Art Institute of Chicago. This oil on canvas measures 207.6cm x 308cm and was inspired by people relaxing at La Grande Jatte in Paris.

As mentioned in the paragraph above, the painting is based around people relaxing in a suburban park on an island in the Seine River called La Grande Jatte. In its remote location, Seurat was able to capture an interesting glimpse of wealthy Parisian life in the 19th century. The planning stage of Seurat's masterpiece involved 28 drawings, 28 panels and three larger canvases. The artist worked on the painting in several operations. He started with small horizontal brush strokes of warm complementary colours and then later added small dots (also in complementary colours) that now appear on the painting as solid and luminous, even when seen from a great distance. The technique Seurat used was called 'pointillism'. Pointillism creates an optical illusion, which makes the painting more effective. Seurat also used composition to balance his work carefully and to make it more interesting to look at. The river to the left is full of yachts and rowing boats, while this balance is matched by the closely placed large figures to the right. Seurat was also influenced by the Grammaire book<sup>1</sup>. It contained ideas on colour, which had been used by previous artists. It was said to be too scientific or mathematical from this point of view, but it was awarded for its 'grand work'. Seurat also created perspective, like many artists, and showed it by having people further away (drawn smaller) than the people at the front (drawn larger). This painting was also a mirror impression of another of his own paintings called 'Bathers at Asnières', which, in my opinion, is on the opposite side of the river.

Seurat's canvas incorporates 2 dogs, 8 boats, 1 monkey and 48 people who congregate on a Sunday to enjoy and parade around in 'nature', which is also called 'en plein air'. From what I can see, there are individual stories being captured by many different characters throughout the painting. It is set on a quiet, relaxing scape where families and friends are mingling for a

special celebration or day of rest. I can tell that it is a sunny summer's day because shadows are forming behind the people and that it captures a sense of joy and happiness. It is set in the time of the Impressionist movement when it was the most popular art style. Many of the characters in the painting are taking part in various activities. There is a man standing at the back playing a trumpet and a young lady near the front holding a flower. The focal point of this painting is the wealthily dressed lady on the right holding a parasol. The way she is dressed reflects on the painting 'Bathers at Asnières' as she is clothed in a long, purple and black skirt and wears a hat with a magenta flower in it. The fact that she is wearing a bustle (a piece of padded clothing that added fullness to the back of a dress) shows that she is an upper-class woman. Whereas, in the other landscape, the group of people are dressed in simple shorts and tops which could tell us they are of a slightly lower class. Because this artwork is set on a Sunday, it easily tells us that no-one is working and that everyone has gathered in the country park to spend recreational time together. In hindsight, 'Bathers at Asnières' only includes seven subjects and 'A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte' includes many more people, which can tell us that there were more rich people than poor and that La Grande Jatte is a busier place. The fact that Seurat has used bright and rich colours links to the people's status and the fashions of that era. Overall the content in this picture makes the audience feel at ease, and evokes feelings of calmness, tranquillity and contentment.

Georges Pierre Seurat was born on December 2, 1859, in Paris, France. His father, Antoine-Chrysostome Seurat, was a customs official who was often away from home. Seurat and his sister and brother were raised primarily by their mother, Ernestine (Faivre) Seurat, before attending school. Seurat received his earliest art lessons from his uncle. He began his formal art education around 1875, when he began attending a local art school, École des Beaux-Arts, and studied a sculpture of Justin Lequien. This was his inspiration for becoming an artist. However, feeling frustrated with the school's strict academic methods, he left and continued to study on his own. As well as being an art student, he also took a shine to the science behind painting. He did plenty of research on colour theory and the psychological power of line and form. In 1883, he exhibited a drawing in the annual Salon (a major state sponsored exhibition). Despite his rejection by the Salon the following year, he formed together with other artists to create a more progressive series of exhibitions. By the mid-1880s, Seurat developed a style of artwork called Pointillism (this we have already looked at). Seurat died on March 29, 1891 in Paris, after a brief illness that was most likely pneumonia or meningitis. He was buried in a cemetery in Paris, just a month before his mother died. When he died, he had already started on another painting called 'The Circus', but it was left unfinished. His paintings and theories are still discussed today and have continued to feature in other artist's work.

The purpose of this scientific painting was to explore many techniques like pointillism. It was on the frontline with regards to both the advancement of Georges Seurat's new painting technique and the Impressionist movement as a whole<sup>2</sup>. From carrying out my research, I have found no evidence that this painting was dedicated to anyone, but it could have been dedicated to the River Seine or La Grande Jatte. Seurat could have just had a real love and affection for his home city of Paris and the interesting people who lived there.

My interpretation of this painting is that it a beautiful, relaxing day by the water's edge, where people come to play their instruments and sail their boats on the lake. From what I can

see, there are a few indications which tell us about what the painting means to the artist. For example, the lady on the right is the focal point because she is possibly one of Seurat's relatives or friends and therefore he dedicated the painting to her, even though there is no evidence to back this up. She also has a monkey on a lead (which was common) which could imply that she is one of the richest women there or is a member of royalty. When he first started to dream up the idea for the painting, Seurat was located at The Seine at Courbevoie so this was definitely the inspiration for his amazing artwork. It also tells me that because Seurat used pointillism, that the painting took an extremely long time to paint. Upon further investigation, I discovered that it actually took him two years to paint it! There are possibly unusual stories happening to each character running through the entire painting. In the centre of the painting there is a young girl, dressed in white, looking directly at 'us'. We could interpret this as her questioning the viewer of the painting, asking "Who are these people?", "What will become of them?" She also looks slightly miserable. Some articles read '*And it is overworked*' which I strongly disagree with. I think this because it is so detailed yet so simple that it is an easy and pleasing painting to be enjoyed. The bathers in the painting 'Bathers at Asnières' are doused in light whereas the figures in 'A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte' appear to be cast in shadows. Everyone has gathered here to escape the heat of the city and therefore, nearly all the women have parasols. Some of the characters, like I mentioned before, are doing curious things. There are women fishing and two soldiers watching the man in the black hat play his instrument. The area was also a place to acquire prostitutes<sup>3</sup>!

In conclusion, this painting is all about a sunny afternoon, on the banks of the River Seine, where people have come to escape the city heat and relax in the cool shade. The painting says to me "come and join us"!

## References

<sup>1</sup> Author not recognised, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, Artable, [http://www.artble.com/artists/georges\\_seurat/paintings/a\\_sunday\\_afternoon\\_on\\_the\\_island\\_of\\_la\\_grande\\_jatte](http://www.artble.com/artists/georges_seurat/paintings/a_sunday_afternoon_on_the_island_of_la_grande_jatte) [02/04/2017]

<sup>2</sup> Author not recognised, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Sunday\\_Afternoon\\_on\\_the\\_Island\\_of\\_La\\_Grande\\_Jatte](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Sunday_Afternoon_on_the_Island_of_La_Grande_Jatte), [01/04/2017].

<sup>3</sup> Author not recognised, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Sunday\\_Afternoon\\_on\\_the\\_Island\\_of\\_La\\_Grande\\_Jatte](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Sunday_Afternoon_on_the_Island_of_La_Grande_Jatte), [01/04/2017].