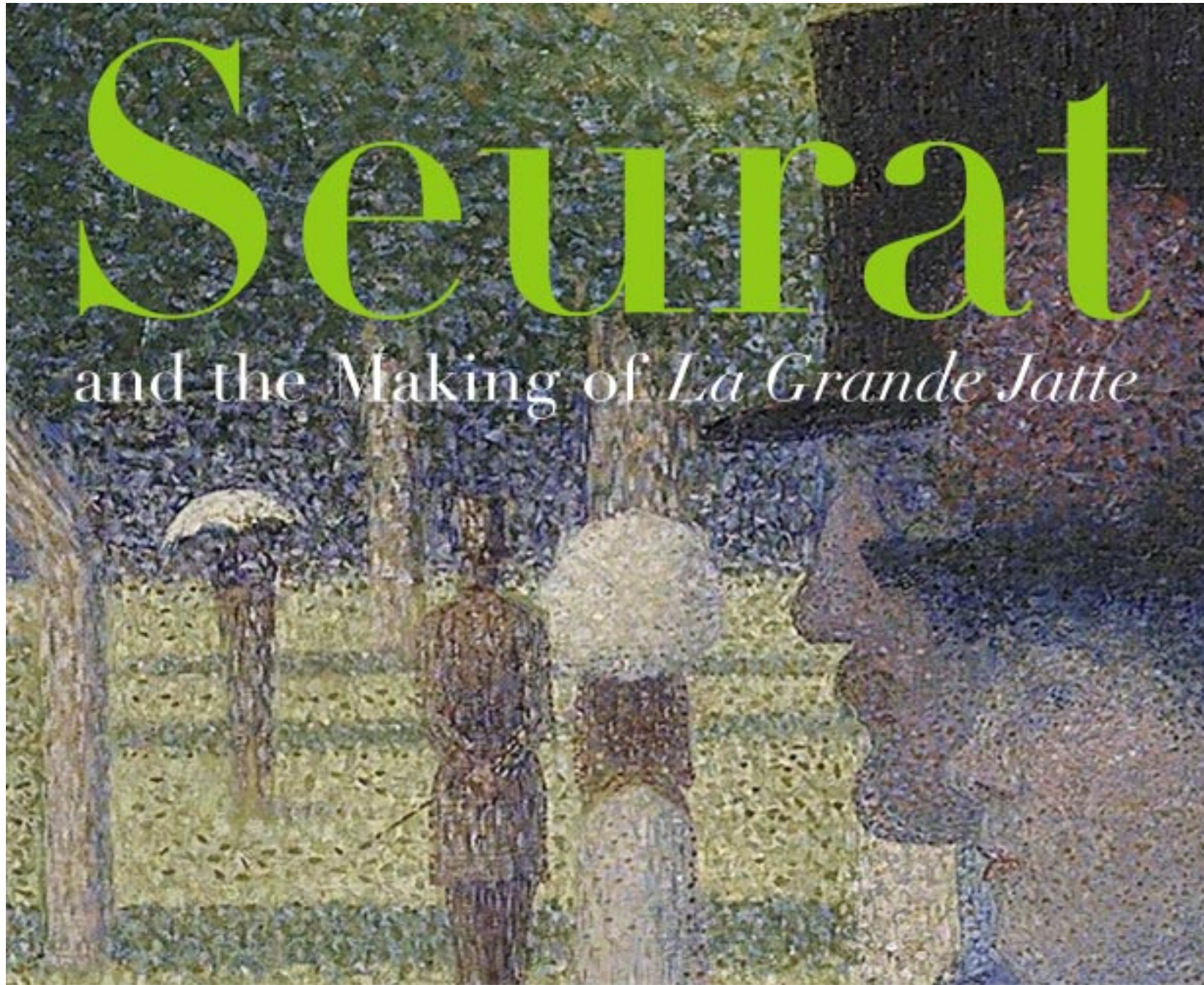


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CAT. 53

Soldier ["*Cadet from Saint-Cyr*"] (study for *La Grande Jatte*), 1884. Oil on panel; 15.2 x 24.1 cm (6 x 9 1/2 in.). Private collection. H 130.



At some point in the summer and early fall of 1884, Seurat executed the landscape of *La Grande Jatte* mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (CAT. 60, p. 80). He exhibited it with the Indépendants in December. Although he reworked the canvas in 1885, its main features remain unaltered (in 1884 it would have lacked the very small dabs that now speckle the shaded and sunlit grass and the shaded portions of the distant trees).⁵ It is more square than the larger painting, giving greater prominence to the expanse of lawn in the foreground. With the final composition in mind, we might find

this unpopulated scene desolate. Monet and other landscapists, however, painted empty parks and meadows, so Seurat's image was not unusual. This is a well-manicured setting designed for strollers and picnickers who are absent for the moment. Three boats animate the water and tell us that we are viewing a place of leisure; a white dog in the distance gives perspective.

In his 1884 landscape, Seurat was able to work on a larger scale than the panels afforded, and on canvas rather than wood, so he could try brushwork and pigments more suitable to the large

composition. For the sunlit grass, he first brushed in light brownish green in relatively large strokes; he then went over it with smaller touches of several greens, yellow-greens, light creams, and oranges. In other words, his "optical mixture" is really based on green; the other hues are present to enliven it. Thus, he did not rely upon the fabled spots of yellow and blue that early writers mistakenly believed become green in the eye. For the water—not reworked in 1885—the artist emulated the technique Monet often used, which involved squeezing out much of the oil from his pigment and then dragging his brush sideways so that the canvas's vertical threads caught the thickened paint, creating a corduroy-like texture. In Seurat's case, the results, paralleling the effects of using a toothing plane on wood, create a glimmering quality that works with the horizontal strokes to simulate the depth and surface of gently lapping water. Subsequently (but perhaps while still working on the painted landscape), Seurat made a drawing (CAT. 63, p. 79) that stretches the view sideways to approximate the proportions of the large sketch and the final picture. It cuts off portions of the top and bottom of the painted landscape and increases the distance between the tree on the left and the forked tree near the center. Its main purpose, however, was to identify the tonal values of the setting, one of many proofs that the artist's conception of dark and light preceded and underlay his thinking about color.

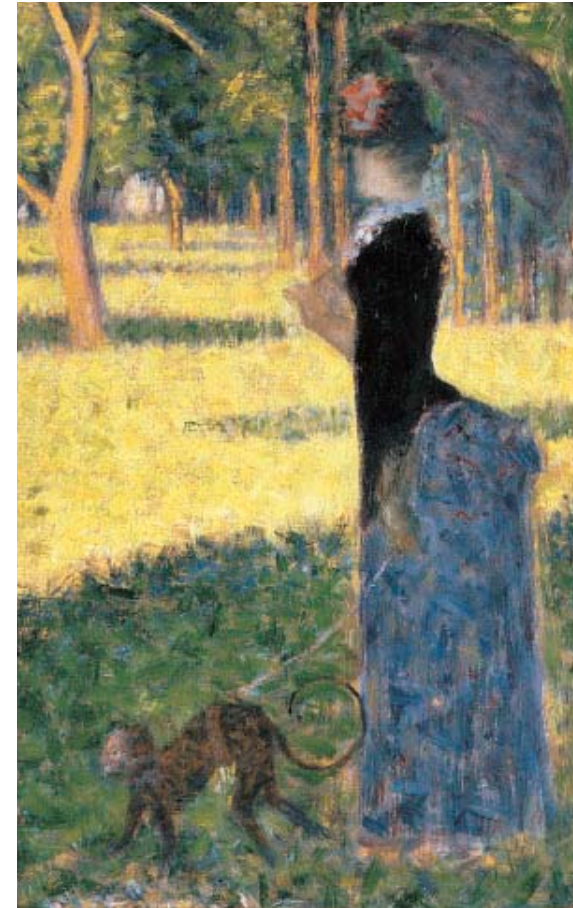
After the landscape painting, Seurat executed another canvas, *The Couple* (CAT. 62, p. 84), which is devoted to the right half of the composition (if

CAT. 63

Landscape, Island of La Grande Jatte (study for *La Grande Jatte*), 1884. Conté crayon on paper; 42.2 x 62.8 cm (16 1/4 x 24 3/4 in.). The British Museum, London, bequeathed by César Mange de Hauke. H 641.

**CAT. 59**

Woman with a Monkey (study for *La Grande Jatte*), 1884. Oil on panel; 24.8 x 15.9 cm (9 3/4 x 6 1/4 in.). Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, purchased. H 137.



there was a similar study for the left half, it has not survived). Because it is squared up for transfer—faint grid lines can be seen—the painter may have used it to block in these figures in his large compositional sketch, although Frank Zuccari and Allison Langley believe the sequence is the reverse (see p. 186). The artist may also have referred to it in order to rough in the forms on the final canvas. It is very loosely brushed and shows us the way the surfaces of both the large sketch and the final work probably looked before he began the complicated layering

of smaller marks (see Fiedler, FIG. 7). While testing the basic colors that would form the basis of the completed picture, Seurat obviously consulted some of his panels. To the right are a few strokes that signify the seated women and the pram included in one panel (CAT. 52, p. 86), and farther back, to the right of the forked tree, are even more minimal indications of the couple with a baby from *Rose-Colored Skirt*.

Intimately related to *The Couple* is a drawing of the same subject (CAT. 61, p. 85), which Seurat

perhaps executed before the large sketch, although Zuccari and Langley argue that it came afterward. They also analyze the marks around the edges of the image, which conform to the spacing of the grids Seurat used in developing both the sketch and *La Grande Jatte* itself, but the drawing's principle function was to help set out or verify the forms on

FIG. 9

Jean-Antoine Watteau (French, 1684–1721). *Fête champêtre*, 1720–21. Oil on canvas; 124.5 x 188 cm (49 x 74 in.). Wallace Collection, London.



FIG. 10 (BOTTOM)

Édouard Manet (French, 1832–1883). *Luncheon on the Grass*, 1863. Oil on canvas; 208 x 264.5 cm (81 7/8 x 104 1/8 in.). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



FIG. 11

Louis-Alexandre Dubourg (French, 1825–1891). *Seaside, Honfleur*, 1869. Oil on canvas; 50 x 86 cm (19 5/8 x 33 7/8 in.). Musée Eugène Boudin, Honfleur.



bosom of their own exhibition. Seurat had the same ambition for *Bathing Place*, exhibited in 1884, two years before *La Grande Jatte*, but its group of lower-class boys and men against a backdrop of factories give it a social content absent in the works of the Impressionists (except for Pissarro, whose images of rural life were equally distant from his colleagues' depictions of bourgeois leisure).

La Grande Tradition, the Primitive, and the Modern

Contemporary in subject and technique, *La Grande Jatte* nonetheless is saturated in what Renoir and others called *la grande tradition*. Like so many Impressionist images, Seurat's subject takes us back to the theme of the Garden of Love and the *fête champêtre*. With their light-struck tones and sylvan

settings, these eighteenth-century paintings by Watteau (see FIG. 9), Pater, and others appealed to the Impressionists, particularly to Renoir. The Goncourt brothers supported this taste for the Rococo, despite the devotion to contemporary life they displayed in their writing. The *fête champêtre* was prolonged in many early nineteenth-century paintings and prints that depict middle-class city dwellers strolling through urban pleasure gardens. And it was not just artists but the bourgeoisie who emulated the aristocratic pleasures of outdoor picnicking, often on property that had once belonged to royalty, church, or nobility but that subsequently was taken over by governments eager to cater to this growing segment of the population. As Leslie Katz so aptly observed about *La Grande Jatte*,

CAT. 103

Camille Pissarro. *Woman and Child at the Well*, 1882. Oil on canvas; 81.5 x 66.4 cm (32 1/8 x 26 1/8 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Potter Palmer Collection. PV 574.

“Fulfillment of the senses in social forms is at the core of French civilization. In Seurat’s masterpiece the courtiers have become the bourgeoisie; unlike Watteau’s people the Parisian middle class doesn’t have to embark for Cytheria—they have arrived, and are installed.”⁹

The factories and working-class boys in *Bathing Place* were part of Seurat’s apprenticeship to naturalism. Too radical a separation of naturalism and Impressionism, however, is unwise, because the popular content of *La Grande Jatte* relates to both. Edmond Duranty, Degas’s friend and a leading naturalist writer, virtually predicted Seurat’s painting in his 1872 novel *Le Peintre Louis Martin*. Martin is a young Impressionist who executes “a rather large painting where people milled about among trees and lawns full of air, light, and verdure, where the characters, ranging from choice elegance to poverty, were closely studied. It was definitely a kind of mirror of Paris.”¹⁰ The Goncourts and Zola wrote numerous scenes of picnics and promenades along Parisian and suburban riverbanks, and Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass* (FIG. 10), shown in the 1863 Salon des Refusés (Duranty’s Martin sees and admires it there), was one of the key pictures of its era. The threesome in the lower left corner of *La Grande Jatte* may even be Seurat’s half-conscious nod to Manet’s famous painting, which was exhibited again in his 1884 posthumous retrospective in Paris.

La Grande Jatte’s modernity is obvious, but its composition relates as well to the French classical tradition. Its size approaches that of a history painting; like an academician preparing for the



FIG. 22

Detail of *La Grande Jatte*;
hornblower at upper left.



FIG. 23

Detail of *La Grande Jatte*;
tree trunk at upper center.



Color and Technique in *La Grande Jatte*

Shifts in the colors of *La Grande Jatte* make it impossible to see the canvas as it was in 1886. In addition to the patina that age normally confers, Seurat used an unstable zinc yellow that changed the pigments with which it was mixed. As early as 1892, several critics noticed the tragic dulling of some colors, but it was not until Inge Fiedler's work in 1984 that this unfortunate choice of pigment was identified. Her essay in the present catalogue brings her research up to date. As a result of her scrupulous investigation, she has documented three stages of work on the painting: the original of 1884–85, a reworking in 1885–86 (when Seurat used the zinc yellow), and the addition of the painted border in 1888 or later (plus a few touches on contiguous areas of the canvas to react to the border). Zinc yellow itself turned brownish yellow, while its

mixture with vermilion formed dull ochers instead of the bright oranges Seurat sought, and its blending with emerald green deteriorated to a dull olive. These form dark spots in the sunlit grass that are particularly disfiguring. The effects of the impure yellow can be seen in the novels on the grass near the woman in the lower left, which once would have been the bright yellow-orange of contemporaneous paperbacks.²³ Recent specialized examinations by Roy Berns and conservators at the Art Institute have helped us understand better how the painting must have appeared originally (see Berns, FIG. 1), and indicate why contemporaries all referred to the canvas's notable luminosity.

Even with these regrettable changes, the principle of Seurat's color harmonies is apparent, a tribute to the residual strength of the conception. In the most general terms, the composition depends upon oppositions of light and dark, and of warm and cool colors. Daniel Catton Rich pointed to these contrasts in 1935:

At the left the woman fishing wears a red-orange dress and is placed against the blue river; midway behind her is a patch of green weeds, and against them the red in her bodice brightens. In the foreground the seated figures appear mostly in violet; where they are silhouetted against the sunlit grass, the grass is yellower; where these figures cross the darker bands of greener shadow, the violet becomes redder. Perhaps the strongest contrast of hues is rightly reserved for the mother in the center. The red of her

FIG. 24

Detail of *La Grande Jatte*;
skirt of *promeneuse* at
lower right.

FIG. 25

Detail of *La Grande Jatte*;
head of seated dandy at
lower left.

parasol beats against the green of the trees; in shadow her hat turns violet against the yellowish tint of the opposite shore.²⁴

When the viewer gets as close to *La Grande Jatte* as Seurat was when he painted it, the color and brushwork appear quite varied and animated. The surface is often wrongly described as a screen of uniform dots; in fact the strokes vary from small dabs to long streaks. Most of the dots were added in the repainting of 1885–86, and a few more around the edges two to three years later, when the border was painted; all lie above a complicated layering of pigment. For the river, Seurat used mostly horizontal strokes and saw no reason to change these when he reworked the canvas. Even at their most regular, these elongated marks vary in width and length, and tilt at slightly different angles (see Fiedler, FIG. 8). To indicate the myriad small leaves or blades of grass that comprise green growth, Seurat applied regular strokes that are not representational and instead have a directionless and nearly uniform texture (see FIG. 21). In this they act as a painter's ground, against which the figures and tree trunks stand out: the traditional "figure-ground" relationship. To give life and three dimensions to his people and trees, the artist applied paint in a curious kind of modeling. Trees are defined by elongated dabs that flow along the axes of their trunks and then change direction to bend or move outward on the branches, as if to trace the flow of sap through them (see FIG. 23). The strokes similarly follow the imagined reality of

