

## Pointillism: Easy to Identify but Often Misunderstood

Definition:

Merriam-Webster defines pointillism as: the theory or practice in art of applying small strokes or dots of color to a surface so that from a distance they blend together.

The history: evolution of the style, the players:

### Pointillism (c.1884-1900)

#### What is Pointillism? - Characteristics

In fine art, the term "pointillism" (from the French word "point" meaning "dot") describes a technique of **Neo-Impressionism** painting, in which hundreds of small dots or dashes of pure colour are applied to the canvas, or other ground, in order to create maximum luminosity. That is, instead of mixing colour pigments on a palette and then applying the mixture onto the painting, the Pointillist applies small dots of pure unmixed colour directly onto the picture and relies on the eye of the viewer to mix the colours optically. Viewed at the right distance, (supposedly three times the diagonal measurement) the dots of colour give a richer and more subtle effect than can be achieved by conventional techniques. Pointillism (actually an offshoot of Divisionism) was the most influential style of Post-Impressionist painting (1880-95) and was practised by Post-Impressionist painters from a number of different schools. Italian Divisionism, led by Vittore Grubicy De Dragon (1851-1920), was especially active.

#### How Does Pointillism Relate to Divisionism and Neo-Impressionism?

Strictly speaking Pointillism refers only to the type of mark made on the canvas (the dot). One might just as easily call it "dottism". The actual theory of mixing paint-pigments optically, rather than on a palette, is known as **Divisionism** (or **Chromoluminarism**). To confuse things further, Pointillism was the signature style of the French painting style known as **Neo-Impressionism**. To put it another way, Neo-Impressionist painters absorbed the colour theories of Divisionism and employed Pointillist brushwork, in order to create the most luminous colours.

Note: in reality, the dots of pure unmixed colour are not actually combined by the human eye, which still sees them as separate colours. However, they do appear to oscillate or vibrate, creating a type of shimmer.

#### Who Invented Pointillism?

The founder of Pointillism was **Georges Seurat** (1859-91), a model student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. A traditional, and conventional classical painter, he rejected Impressionism, a style of painting and colour based on the subjective responses of the individual artist, in favour of a more scientific method which he developed around 1884 and called Chromoluminarism. Based on the scientific colour theory of the French chemist Michel Eugene Chevreul (*Law of Simultaneous Colour Contrast*, 1839), and the American physicist Ogden Rood (*Modern Chromatics*, 1879), the method was used to a degree by the Impressionist painters, but only on an ad hoc basis, and it was not developed

systematically until Seurat. (Compare Monet's approach, see: Characteristics of Impressionist Painting 1870-1910.)

Seurat's main disciple was the former Impressionist **Paul Signac** (1863-1935). A coastal landscape artist, Signac was strongly attracted by the scientific method behind Pointillism and Divisionism and, after Seurat's death in 1891, he became the leading exponent of the Neo-Impressionist movement. In addition to oil paintings and watercolours, he also produced a number of lithographs, etchings and pen-and-ink sketches composed of tiny, laboriously laid out dots. A strong supporter of younger artists within the Post-Impressionism movement, Signac was reportedly the first person to buy a painting from Henri Matisse.

### **Who Are The Greatest Pointillist Painters?**

Seurat and Signac remain the greatest exponents of Pointillism. As well as them, the Impressionist **Camille Pissarro** (1830-1903) was also an active member of the school, as was **Henri-Edmond Cross** (1856-1910), and **Maximilien Luce** (1858-1941) who portrayed industrial society and working-class scenes. Other artists associated with the idiom include: the Fauvist leader **Henri Matisse** (1869-1954); **Albert Dubois-Pillet** (1846-90), a self-taught artist who adapted Pointillism to landscape scenery and naturalist subjects; **Charles Agrand** (1854-1926), who was more of a lyrical painter; **Giuseppe Pelizza da Volpedo** (1868-1907), the leading Italian Pointillist; and **Theo van Rysselberghe** (1862-1926) the founder of *Les Vingt*, a group of progressive Post-Impressionists. Even **Van Gogh** (1853-90) painted occasionally in a Pointillist style.

### **Legacy**

Neo-Impressionism had a notable influence on the next generation, including the likes of **Matisse** and Andre Derain. In particular, its focus on colour stimulated the emergence of the Fauvism school - and therefore German expressionism - thus playing an important role in the evolution of modern art. NOTE: To see how Monet's, Seurat's and Signac's so-called 'naturalism' led paradoxically to abstraction, see: Realism to Impressionism (1830-1900).

### **ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ART HISTORY**

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Color as light:

Merriam-Webster defines color as: 1. a phenomenon of light (such as red, brown, pink, or gray) or visual perception that enables one to differentiate otherwise identical objects 2. the aspect of the appearance of objects and light sources that may be described in terms of hue, lightness, and saturation for objects and hue, brightness, and saturation for light sources. *Also*: a specific combination of hues saturation, and lightness or brightness.

Color vibration: importance of intensity; value

In the extreme, color vibration is usually considered a “bad” thing. Consider the effect of a bright vermilion red placed next to a bright royal blue. The visual effect would not only appear to vibrate, but also cause an afterimage or “ghost” image once you look away. This is not the impression most artists want their viewers to take away with them. However, placing colors of the same value, but lesser intensity, next to each other creates a pleasant sparkle and liveliness in a painting.

## The artistic spirit of pointillism: the point of pointillism

Obviously pointillism is not for everyone. Most artists would describe the process as “slow”, “painstaking”, or downright painful. But I would encourage you to give it a try, perhaps attempting to reproduce a small area of a Seurat or Signac painting. The exercise can give you a deeper understanding of how each color affects the surrounding colors. The understanding you gain will help you when selecting colors for future paintings. You may feel more confident in your choices and even find some surprising palettes.

### Modern inspiration:

#### **Angelo Franco**

Angelo Franco was born in Ecuador and moved to the United States when he was 19. He studied under a full-merit scholarship at the Art Students League in New York City and has been painting for more than thirty years. Angelo's work is included in the Art Students League's permanent collection and featured in numerous private and corporate art collections. His style is highly colorful and contrastive and is based on trying to capture the essence of his subjects, whether natural sceneries or still lifes.

#### **Ton Dubbeldam**

Ton Dubbeldam was born in the small town of Schoonhoven, Holland in 1957. His father was a musician and his grandfather a painter. As a boy his passion for art was fueled by trips to Paris and the French countryside where he was inspired by the works of the impressionist masters Van Gogh, Degas, Monet, and Klimt. From Klimt he learned to do the high or very low horizons for which he is known. Through these unique views (as through the eyes of a child) the water and sky are strongly accented. This technique is combined with a particular light effect (“repousser”) he creates by pushing the light to the rear of the painting and making the foreground very dark. Ton says, “You take a step into the painting and follow the light.”

Ton Dubbeldam studied six years to become an art teacher, but after teaching only two years, he decided to paint full time when his own artwork started selling through Europe.

### Resources

Griffel, Lois. *Painting the Impressionistic Landscape: Lessons in Interpreting Light and Color*. New York, Watson-Guptill Publications, 1994.

Kessler, Margaret. *Color Harmony in Your Paintings*. Cincinnati, Northlight Books, 2004.

McKinley, Richard. *Pastel Pointers*. Cincinnati, Northlight Books, 2010.

Vanderpoel, Emily Noyes. *Color Problems: A Practical Manual for the Lay Student of Color*. (Copyright 1901.) Brooklyn, Sacred Bones Books, 2018.