

**SEURAT  
SIGNAC**

WAYS OF POINTILLISM

**VAN GOGH**

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## Exhibition facts

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Contact                    Albertinaplatz 1 | A-1010 Vienna  
T +43 (0)1 534 83-0  
[info@albertina.at](mailto:info@albertina.at) | [www.albertina.at](http://www.albertina.at)

Opening hours            Daily 10 am – 6 pm,  
Wednesdays 10 am – 9 pm

Press contact             Sarah Wulbrandt  
T +43 (01) 534 83 - 511 | M +43 (0)699.12178720  
[s.wulbrandt@albertina.at](mailto:s.wulbrandt@albertina.at)  
Ivana Novoselac-Binder  
T +43 (01) 534 83 - 514 | M +43 (0)699.12178741  
[i.novoselac-binder@albertina.at](mailto:i.novoselac-binder@albertina.at)  
Barbara Walcher  
T +43 (01) 534 83 - 512 | M +43 (0)699.109 81743  
[b.walcher@albertina.at](mailto:b.walcher@albertina.at)

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# Seurat, Signac, Van Gogh

## Ways of Pointillism

16 September 2015 – 8 January 2016

When Georges Seurat died unexpectedly in 1891 at the age of 31, his older colleague Camille Pissarro already had an inkling that Seurat's "invention" was to have consequences for painting "that would be highly significant later on". And indeed, with just a few pictures, Seurat had founded a style that would play a pioneering role in Modern Art: Pointillism.

This fascinating art movement is now the focus of a high-calibre exhibition at the Albertina, a presentation that completes the story of Modern Art with the significant chapter of Pointillism as its midwife: 100 selected masterpieces by the main representatives of this style, Seurat and Signac, as well as impressive paintings, watercolours, and drawings by modernist masters who were fascinated by this pointed technique—figures such as Van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso—illustrate Pointillism's breath-taking radiance and seminal impact.

*Seurat, Signac, Van Gogh*, organised in cooperation with the Kröller-Müller Museum, tells the success story of Pointillism from its creation in 1886 to its effects on the early 1930s. Beginning with the ground-breaking early works by Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, and Théo van Rysselberghe, this exhibition draws an arc from Paul Signac's and Henri-Edmond Cross's transformation of the points into small squares and mosaics all the way to the masterpieces of Vincent Van Gogh, the vibrant colours of the Fauves, the decoratively placed dots in the cubist works of Pablo Picasso, and the abstract works of Piet Mondrian. This comprehensive presentation sheds light on the unique metamorphosis of the pointillist dot and for the first time makes a theme of those achievements of the pointillists that were subsequently harnessed by modernism.

### Between Realism and Abstraction

The painters to whom we now refer to as "pointillists" due to their unusual techniques set out in 1886 to challenge the avant-garde tendencies of the impressionists, which had by then become de rigueur. And the subsequent development of painting in Paris towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would show just how right Pissarro's prescient judgment was: the emphasis on surfaces and stylisation as well as the motionlessness and detachment of the depicted figures in the works by Seurat tell of increasing pictorial autonomy and, accordingly, of an abstraction of both content and form. This would soon move between two poles: the picture's geometrisation and its ornamentation by means of arabesques. In reducing their painterly handwriting to the smallest possible artistic statement—the dot—Seurat, Signac, Pissarro, and Rysselberghe not only distanced themselves from the impressionists' reproduction of fleeting moments, but also used their approach to question the entire centuries-old norm of painting according to nature in the form of brushstrokes. Points in solid colours, which the pointillists placed close together in keeping with the optical principle of colour mixing, generated a hitherto-unknown radiance and a multitude of chromatic impulses. It was thus that the realistic view of the world gave way to depictions of a synthetic reality—and in one fell swoop, the doors were wide open for Modernism.

Following Seurat's death, it was above all his colleague Signac who developed the pointillist technique further: together with Henri-Edmond Cross, Signac increased luminosity, intensified colour contrasts, and coined the term "Divisionism". His small, systematically placed points soon developed

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into lines meant to appear as a mixture of colours when viewed from an appropriate distance. With this more liberal approach, Signac liberated painters from the obligation to use dots, and it was thus that a younger generation—including Henri Matisse and his circle as well as Piet Mondrian—ultimately broke out of Seurat's rigid system.

## **Vincent Van Gogh: An Individual Path**

An important intermediary in this development was Vincent van Gogh, an outsider and brief adherent of Pointillism who set off in new directions. Van Gogh at first took up Seurat's ideas with enthusiasm: his pallet became brighter and more luminous, and an abundant flurry of dots found entry into his landscapes. But the systematically dotted style never played a truly central role in Van Gogh's output. The artist soon adopted a freer form of expression that better matched his nature: "It is working with points and similar elements that I hold to be the real discoveries; but we must already be at pains to ensure that this technique, just like any other, does not itself become a general dogma." He said this in 1888, at which point he began countering the cool and rational pointillist style with his own individual expression and emotion.

## **Matisse, Mondrian, and Picasso**

Something similar can be seen in the reception of Divisionism in the oeuvre of Henri Matisse. The founding Fauve had turned to this technique in two steps: 1897 saw him experiment with comma-like, impressionist micro-structures that are not dissimilar to Pissarro's mode of painting, and in 1898 he intensified colours and contrasts, which subsequently led to a valid implementation of the divisionist method in terms of both chromatic division and the use of dots.

Soon, Van Gogh, Matisse, and the Fauves moved Piet Mondrian, as well, to turn away from Pointillism. Under the influence of the luminist Jan Toorop, Mondrian used his paintings to deal above all with light effects, relying on motifs and an expressive power that had already become established in the works of Van Gogh and the anarchic art of the Fauves.

In the works of Pablo Picasso, as well, Pointillism and its pioneering ideas did not go unnoticed. At altogether three junctures in his career—1901, 1914, and 1917—the Spanish artist dealt playfully with the output of Seurat and integrated points into his own work. The first time he did so, Picasso was motivated by his desire to conform to the times; later on, though, he used loosely arranged points to develop the decorative surfaces of so-called "Rococo Cubism". His final take on the technique was the masterpiece *Return from the Baptism*, which amounted to a precise and entirely consummate quotation.

## Wall texts

### The Art of Sounding the Flat Surface

Georges Seurat

Georges Seurat started out as a draughtsman. A disciple of Ingres's Neoclassicism, he painstakingly outlined his figures with distinct contours and carefully modelled them with delicately shaded transitions. But it was not long before his drawing style would change radically. Using his fingertip, he rubbed the creasy black pigment of the Conté crayon onto the coarse surface of the drawing paper. Depending on the pressure, larger or smaller amounts of the pigment would adhere more or less thickly to the grainy material. There is no stroke and no line in these drawings to guide the spectator's eye, just the light shining forth vaguely from the dark expanse. Seurat fathomed the deepness of black. Absorbing the light, the surfaces of his drawings shimmer in their porous blackness. Subtle contrasts of light and dark reduce the figures to bodiless silhouettes.

Seurat recorded unspectacular motifs on the outskirts of the city – passers-by and strollers he ran into in the Parisian suburbs. Simplifying them to geometric shapes, he used these figures to study the contrasts of light and dark.

Still adhering to an Impressionist brushwork, Seurat also sketched an idle bourgeoisie on a Sunday afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte near Paris on small panels of wood. When transferring these motifs to the canvas, he translated them into small dots for the first time, placing them closely next to one another.

### The Order of Geometry

Paul Signac

On Sundays the Signac family had a mute luncheon. After relishing his *café-rhum*, the grandfather would read the paper brought in by a maid. Paul Signac's *Dining Room* was made in response to Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, which presents the Parisian bourgeoisie in the act of public self-display during leisure time. Signac's composition, on the other hand, offers an intimate glimpse of the domestic bourgeois environment. Everything is subordinate to an austere pictorial geometry: circular, rectangular, and cuboid shapes are distributed across the surface of the picture; the flat figures are inscribed in an orthogonal system of horizontals and verticals and rendered in strict profile or frontal view. No interaction between the protagonists and no narrative moment interrupt the silence.

## Paris – Brussels

### Hotspots of Pointillism

Spreading rapidly beyond Paris, Pointillism reached the Brussels art scene, which readily welcomed avant-gardism. Following the example of the Parisian group of 'independent' artists ('Les Indépendants'), Belgian artists also joined forces to fight academism. The group Les Vingt ('The Twenty') maintained close relations to the French avant-garde and immediately embraced Pointillism with great enthusiasm. In 1887, Seurat exhibited his painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* in Brussels. Impressed by the new style, the Belgians Henry van de Velde, William Alfred Finch, and Théo van Rysselberghe and the Dutchman Jan Toorop broke free from Impressionism practically overnight. They reduced their motifs to abstract shapes, stylised their objects, and simplified their compositions to geometric constructions of what seemed to be halftone surfaces.

Regardless of the motif, Van de Velde and Toorop covered their pictures with flimsy veils of brightly shining dots, thereby achieving an almost abstract simplicity. Toorop also admired Japanese woodblock prints and the art of Paul Gauguin. Curved lines and sweeping arabesques were used to set the dotted planes apart from one another.

Some artists felt confined by Pointillism's decorative dictate. Van de Velde became a designer and architect, and Finch switched to ceramics. Only Théo van Rysselberghe held on to the Pointillist painting technique. His palette was close to that of his friend Paul Signac, with whom he undertook extensive sailing trips along the French Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts.

## The Sound of Images

### Paul Signac

Paul Signac was a close friend of Georges Seurat, his senior by four years, and after Impressionist beginnings adopted Seurat's Pointillism. However, although employing the same painting technique, he pursued different goals. Yet both artists strove for a new pictorial harmony and hence for a liberation of the image from nature: this autonomy of art would eventually pave the way for modernism. Whereas Seurat achieved a homogeneous pictorial surface by using related colours and focusing on rhythm and line, Signac sought to achieve visual harmony through the interplay of contrasting, intensely brilliant colours. He divided the surface into geometrically abstract or stylised, arabesque-like shadows on the one hand and naturalistically rendered motifs on the other.

In the nineteenth century there was a widespread ambition to create a harmony in painting that was related to that of music. Many of Signac's contemporaries were guided by the idea that their pictures were 'harmonies of tones of colour'; the American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler, for example, entitled his works as 'harmony', 'symphony', or 'nocturne'. Signac borrowed from him by assigning opus numbers to his paintings, thereby emphasising the abstract and musical qualities of his pictures.

Paul Signac was the mouthpiece of Pointillism in France and won over many other artists for the movement. He established contacts with the Belgian group Les Vingt and Théo van Rysselberghe, who became the leader of the Belgian Pointillists.

## Arabesque and Silhouette

### Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross

After Georges Seurat's death in 1891, many painters turned away from Pointillism. The tiring and time-consuming work in the studio prompted them to abandon the dotted technique, and they resumed painting in the open, *en plein air*. Others, including Henry van de Velde, gave up painting entirely and devoted themselves to architecture, the decorative arts, and furniture design. What all of these artistic disciplines shared with Pointillism was their tendency towards a decorative approach.

Although Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross remained true to Pointillism, they also borrowed from the decorative linearity and flatness of popular Japanese woodblock prints. In these pictures, long, curved lines and arabesques unifying the motifs encourage the eye to wander across the surface; overlapping planes in contrasting colours resemble flat foils: these were the beginnings of the 'radical flatness' that would eventually separate modernist art from five centuries of illusionism – from art as a mimicry of nature.

Confronted with these pictures, one is invited to delve into an unreal world untouched by technological progress and modern life in the metropolis. The artists questioned the benefits of technology and science, which did not provide any answers to the mystery of existence. They hoped to find them in contemporary Symbolist literature and the pristine landscape of Southern France.

## The Proletariat in Pointillism

### Maximilien Luce

The art critic Félix Fénéon referred to Maximilien Luce's manner of painting as 'pigmentary pudding', complaining about the sloppiness with which he executed his pictures: Luce did not let the paint layers dry long enough. Unlike all of the other Pointillists, the artist staged the harsh reality of labourers. In his pictures he wished to direct attention to the changing political and social situation in France. Indeed, anarchist attacks destabilised the governments in Paris and Brussels. Similar to the anarchists and socialists, who strove for a political and social revolution, poets, journalists, and painters called for a renewal in the arts.

Luce made no secret of his revolutionary attitude. Removing art from its ivory tower, he depicted the lower classes in an unsentimental fashion. His craftsmen are lonely, but proud, and his industrial workers in the coal fields of Northern France and Belgium represent a self-assured collective. Luce painted the gloomy suburbs of Montmartre with their factory halls, chimneys, tenements, tiny vegetable plots, and dilapidated cabins without idealising them. In his paintings, one looks in vain for the picturesque and pompous Paris of the Belle Époque.

## Arcadia in Modernism

### Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross

After Georges Seurat's death, many artists turned their back on Pointillism: in the 1890s, even Camille Pissarro – originally an Impressionist and subsequently one of Seurat's followers – missed painting from nature outdoors. Only Paul Signac consistently took Seurat's legacy further and became its harbinger proper.

Signac found a companion in Henri-Edmond Cross. Both artists settled in Saint-Tropez, where they evoked the unspoilt and untroubled atmosphere of the French coast and its hinterland in their paintings in bright and brilliant colours. Idly resting couples, shepherds, and herds of goats are bathed in a proverbially 'golden' light that conjures up an Arcadian present untouched by modern civilisation. In 1899, Signac published his influential theory of Pointillism. Pushing the principle of colour division to the fore, he now referred to the style as 'Divisionism'.

In his late period, Signac revisited the pictorial traditions of the Old Masters. Inspired by Claude Lorrain, Joseph Vernet, and William Turner, he and Cross painted the ports of such important coastal towns as Rotterdam, Marseille, Constantinople, Venice, and London. Signac's pioneering phase, with its small, regular, and undirected dots gave way to a calmed-down, classicising painting technique of vertical and horizontal strokes. After Cross's death in 1910, Signac remained behind as the last Neo-Impressionist of the founding generation. His art now had a strong impact on the younger generation, including Henri Matisse and André Derain. They concentrated on the technique of colour division, which permitted them to radically free colour from the dictate of the natural object.

## From Coloured Dots to Patches of Colour

### Paul Signac

Paul Signac's development is symptomatic of a general transformation of the *pointillé*. Initially, artists placed tiny dots closely next to one another, which subsequently evolved into small, mosaic-like strokes that gradually also unfolded a directional force: this would finally become the gateway to the coloured line of Expressionism. Although the Pointillists modified their brushwork, they held on to the principle of colour division. Their spectrum of colours shifted: cool tones gave way to warmer hues and a more expressive palette. Powerful contrasts ignoring the natural colours of objects lend expression to emotions. Signac paved the way for Matisse's flat patches of colour.

## Idle Leisure and Sensibility

### Théo van Rysselberghe's View of Women

For lack of commissions and money for models at the beginning of his career, Théo van Rysselberghe painted portraits of family members and friends. In 1888 he combined the traditional genre of bourgeois portraiture with the most recent avant-gardist principles of Pointillism and soon became a highly successful and popular modern portraitist. The likenesses of the three daughters of his friend Gérard Sèthe and his wife are characterised by a daring composition that radically deviates from conventional portraiture and by a Pointillist technique that lights up the colours and generates a festive atmosphere.

Van Rysselberghe places the dots closely next to one another, essentially limiting them to two complementary colours. Unlike Achille Laugé he embeds his figures in the surrounding space: an interior or a garden, the sitters' postures, and musical instruments function as vehicles for the expression of a privileged social group's aesthetic sensitivity and cultivated idleness. Van Rysselberghe masterfully described shining satins, soft woollen carpets, gently shimmering wallpaper, and gleaming floors. In one of his early masterpieces he similarly concentrated entirely on the surface textures: the female protagonists of a garden party have averted their heads so that their faces are only shown in lost profile. The focus is on the relaxed atmosphere in a garden suffused with the light of summer.

## The Timelessness of the Present

### Achille Laugé

'The ignorant believe that Pointillism only works for landscapes and not for figures.' This is how Paul Signac defended Georges Seurat against the accusation that Pointillist figures appeared rigid, lifeless, and frozen. Critics described them as planar and thin-skinned, their bodies covered with dots as if they were 'suffering from the measles'.

Younger reviewers compared these figures, which seemed to have congealed into still lifes, to those of Egyptian art or to those in the monumental paintings of the early Italian Renaissance. The Pointillists regarded their approach to the human figure first and foremost as the embodiment of a modern style. For them, being modern meant to return to the roots and express themselves authentically in their painting, uninhibited by convention and academic tradition.

Coming from Toulouse, the Pointillist painter Achille Laugé joined the avant-garde in Paris, where he shared a studio with the classicising sculptor Aristide Maillol. Impressed by Seurat's dotted technique, Laugé virtually wrested sculptural qualities from Pointillism. Having returned to his native town, he painted portraits and figures that seem carved from stone and are outlined by distinct contours. Light is used to sharply cut the body out from the backdrop and model it as if it were a relief, similar to the masters of Italian Quattrocento painting, above all Piero della Francesca. Laugé borrowed the colour scheme for his paintings from pastel chalks.

## From the Dot to the Coloured Line

### Vincent van Gogh in Search of Light

Weary of the dark painting of his native Holland, Vincent van Gogh set out for Paris in 1886. He wanted to paint bright and colourful pictures like the Impressionists.

Georges Seurat und Paul Signac presented their Pointillist paintings for the first time. The city's art scene was gripped by Seurat's invention as if by a fever. Only Van Gogh did not seem to be impressed at first. Yet he was interested in the application of the recently discovered theory of complementary colours, according to which a maximum of luminosity and contrast could be achieved by juxtaposing certain tones. The way he put it into practice, however, relied on small strokes and hatching instead of dots.

Van Gogh engaged with Seurat's dotted technique only one year later, in 1887. He roamed the suburbs of Paris with Paul Signac, but not even this friendship between artists could convince him of a technique that profoundly went against the grain of his temperament.

Nevertheless, Van Gogh took Signac's theory of complementary colours with him to Southern France, where he settled in 1888 to capture the light of the south. Vincent favoured the free and spontaneous mode of painting in nature as almost no other artist did.

He gradually left the technique of dots behind him. The method re-emerged particularly in the artist's pen-and-ink drawings in the form of dabs and squiggles employed in conjunction with other fragmented forms. In the end, an entirely individual expression using animated and contrasting lines of colour prevailed, lending his paintings an enormous intensity and vital brilliance.

Ten years after Van Gogh's death, his painting would make a deep impression on Henri Matisse and André Derain.

## The Colourful Tiles of a Mosaic

### Jean Metzinger

Having studied Byzantine art in Venice, the English writer and artist John Ruskin encouraged his contemporaries to compose their pictures like mosaics. This ideal was not only pursued by Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross, but also by the younger painters Robert Delaunay and Jean Metzinger. Their pictures are built of small, square-shaped, and variously sized mosaic tiles running in different directions and exhibiting colours of varying intensity. The patterns resulting from this approach vibrate like sound and, similar to the lines of a poem, lend rhythm to the composition; recurring like rhymes, they help translate the sensations aroused by nature into an autonomous visual poetry.

Metzinger called his pictures 'chromatic verses'. He organized his colours according to the principle of colour division. Delaunay's approach was close to this technique, which was based on mosaics rather than on the *pointillé*. Under the impression of the first exhibition of the Fauves and a Van Gogh retrospective in 1905, his brushwork and handling of colour become more liberal in comparison to Metzinger's art.

## Pointillism Gone Wild

### Henri Matisse and the Fauves

In his programmatic treatise *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*, Paul Signac modified Seurat's Pointillist technique. Meticulous dotting had exhausted itself. Since many painters regarded Seurat's method as time-consuming, Signac proclaimed the division of colour – Divisionism – to be the true essence of Pointillism. This approach impressed a younger generation of artists. The shift from small dots to patches endowed the immobile, timelessly solemn art of early Pointillism with a new dynamism. Henri Matisse and André Derain worked in the sphere of a Pointillism that was now called Divisionism.

In the summer of 1904, Signac invited Matisse to Saint-Tropez. After weeks of indecision, Matisse arrived at an energetic Divisionist style. He placed the dots further apart from one another and outlined his motifs, which, being in opposition to Signac's Divisionist rule, was disapproved of. Matisse also ceased to strictly follow the theory of complementary colours.

In the summer of 1905, Matisse and Derain, while staying in the small fishing village of Collioure, completely ridded themselves of the 'tyrannical' order of Divisionism and proclaimed a painting style devoid of rigid rules and strict laws. This marked the birth of Fauvism, which would be mocked as the 'painting of wild beasts' (from the French *fauve*).

In their works, the Fauves used a combination of coloured strokes and patches of colour. Although the colours follow the rule of Divisionism, they are more in line with inner sensations. Painting had definitely become 'autonomous', independent of the model of nature.

## The Acceleration of the Dot

### Pointillism in Futurism

Italian modernism achieved its breakthrough through Divisionism rather late. Giacomo Balla and Carlo Carrà first encountered the paintings of Georges Seurat at the 1900 Paris World's Fair; travelling to Paris four years later, Umberto Boccioni and Gino Severini were overwhelmed by the breathless speed and thrilling dynamism of the City of Light on the Seine. Back in Italy, they tackled such new motifs as the electrified city and accelerated traffic.

In the hands of the Futurists the stationary dot became a fidgety atom. The restless pace of the metropolis, the pulsating crowds in the streets, and the glistening atmosphere of a world illuminated by prosaic electric light replaced the scenes of relaxed idleness and pastime pleasures. If Seurat's manner of painting had evoked a solemn tranquillity and timelessness due to its orthogonal pictorial organization and austere geometric order, the Futurists' approach to painting and composition galvanized pictorial space, in which all of the motifs were set into perpetual motion.

## The Dot Set in Motion

### Paul Klee

In 1931, following his teaching assignment at the Bauhaus, Paul Klee began to work at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf. This change of scenery also prompted a transformation of his visual language. His pictures were not motivated by content, but by configuration, by form as such.

For Paul Klee, the drawn dot, 'set in motion at the beginning of pictorial form', constituted a theme of its own with which he had dealt since his days at the Bauhaus. In Düsseldorf, he also took to applying dots of colour to his paintings, frequently stamping them onto green tones or placing them next to each other in the form of horizontal bands, varying their intensity and hues. He added lines recalling a window cross or depicting a mountain ridge whose peaks stand out against the planar surface of the landscape. Klee did not intend to depict light, but to refine his abstract colour concepts. Alluding to George Seurat's dotted technique, Klee referred to his method as 'pointillé'. Yet it differed fundamentally from that of Seurat. Seurat was interested in rendering light. Klee's approach to colour, on the other hand, did not follow the scientific laws of Divisionism, the division of colour. Deviating from the path of a scientific analysis of light and colour phenomena, he employed the dotted technique quite subjectively as a vehicle of expression in its own right.

## The Migration of the Dot

### Piet Mondrian

Mondrian's abstract work unfolds as the last chapter in the history of modernism's division of colour. In his pictures, Mondrian aimed to create a pure, absolute harmony independent of the object, a 'universal beauty'. Gradually leaving the concrete representation of landscapes and objects behind, the artist finally arrived at a new mode of composition, in which nothing but the three primary colours, as well as horizontal and vertical lines, describe the forces of reality.

After his Impressionist beginnings, Mondrian, when moving in the circle of the Amsterdam Luminists, relied on powerful light effects that blurred the form. In Domburg, a resort on the North Sea, he went one step further and focused on structures of the concrete world and the diversified manifestations of light in a general way. Yellow dabs visualize the dazzling rays of the sun on the sand, rays whose reflections the artist has rendered in pink, turquoise, and red. The colours vibrate in an almost spiritual light. Eventually, Mondrian achieved harmony by reducing his pictorial language to clearly separate elements: the primary colours of red, yellow, and blue, as well as the non-colours black and white for the horizontal and vertical lines and the ground of the painting.

## Confetti Cubism

### Pablo Picasso

Georges Seurat and Pablo Picasso abandoned the traditional understanding of art as a reproduction of reality. With his principle of geometrising both his compositions and his pictorial subjects, Seurat freed painting from the constraints of imitating nature. In 1901, after visiting a major Seurat exhibition, Picasso, paying tribute to the Pointillist he admired, painted Spanish dancers and a prostitute set off against a jumble of brushed dots expressively whirling all over the canvas.

In 1913, Picasso again came to integrate dots of colour into his compositions. Like his friend Georges Braque, he structured his Cubist pictures with dotted areas. The coloured dots lend his paintings a decorative lightness; formally, they merge the different levels of meaning and diverse picture planes. In 1917, Picasso returned to the roots of the great Pointillist tradition once more. He 'modernised' a painting by the French Baroque realist and peasant painter Louis Le Nain by creating an almost abstract picture, with countless coloured dots raining down on the motif like swirls of confetti. The painting dates from a time at which Picasso, for the first time in his career, relied on different, even past styles at the same time to present one and the same subject in varying languages and grammars. Having turned Neo-Classicist, the inventor of Cubism painted a central work of French Baroque art in a Pointillist manner: Picasso regarded the picture as a manifesto for the freedom of art emancipating itself from the corset of a supposedly prescribed style of the time. The free artist can always choose which style he will use.