SUNDAY
IN THE PARK
WITH GEORGE

EDUCATION RESOURCE
VISUAL ARTS
SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE

A masterpiece comes to life

In 1884, a twenty-five year old French Impressionist named Georges Seurat began work on *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, an idyllic park scene that would eventually become an icon of late 19th century painting.

*Sunday in the Park with George* is a joyous musical theatre retelling of a visionary artist’s creative process. Seurat’s much-loved painting comes to life, revealing the lives and loves of its subjects, and exploring the ‘art of making art’ across generations, from 19th century Paris to 20th century Chicago.

Following its Broadway opening, legendary conductor Leonard Bernstein declared it ‘brilliant’. A year later *Sunday in the Park with George* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

**Sunday in the Park with George | Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine**

20 – 27 July Playhouse, Arts Centre Melbourne

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

Book by James Lapine.

Originally Directed on Broadway by James Lapine. Originally Produced on Broadway by The Shubert Organisation and Emanuel Azenberg.

By arrangement with Playwrights Horizon, Inc. New York City which produced the original production of *Sunday In The Park with George* in 1983.

By arrangement with Hal Leonard Australia Pty Ltd Exclusive agent for Music Theatre International (NY).

**WHAT TO EXPECT BEFORE, DURING & AFTER YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE!**

To gain the most of your opera experience it is highly recommended to study the work, discover its inspiration, learn about the composers and explore the main themes. The following educational resources will provide you with information about the work, what to expect during your opera experience and post opera reflection. Most of the information is included here in the pre-visit exploration section can be re-visited during and after the opera experience. Visit our [interactive Wall online](#) for historical facts, behind-the-scenes, photographs and more!
OVERVIEW

About this Resource Pack
This compact resource for secondary teachers includes some interesting facts, key questions and points of discussion to facilitate an engaging experience of discovery at Victorian Opera. The resource includes both pre-visit and post-visit suggested activities which aim to enrich student understanding and enjoyment of the opera experience.

Sunday in the Park with George provides a unique opportunity to unite opera and the visual arts. Students will be invited to uncover the intriguing relationship between an iconic painting and the musical it inspired 100 years after its creation.

Art is Harmony. Harmony is the analogy of opposites, the analogy of similar elements of tone, of colour, and of line, considered according to their dominants and under the influence of lighting in gay, calm, or sad combinations.1 Georges Seurat (August, 1890)

About Sunday in the Park with George
During the period from 1884-1886 Georges Seurat painted the iconic A Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884, which was to become one of the world’s most recognisable images. The painting exemplifies the ground-breaking technique Seurat developed known as Neo-Impressionism or Pointillism, the meticulous practice of painting tiny brushstrokes of pure opposing colours side by side to create a luminous sparkling effect.

This painting was the inspiration for the opera Sunday in the Park with George. Seurat’s complex and beautiful exploration of colour and light is honoured and theatrically realised by Stephen Sondheim (music) and James Lapine (Libretto).

About Georges Seurat

- Seurat studied first with a sculptor before he was classically trained in art at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. His education was cut short by military service.
- Seurat made black and white drawings of particular types of people in France - nurses, workers, farm hands etc. He used conte crayon to create symphonies of light and shade.
- 24 years old when he started painting A Sunday on La Grande Jatte - 1884
- Seurat was described as being reserved, eccentric and aloof.
- He was determined to pioneer his own style – this painting can be seen as Seurat’s manifesto.
- His career lasted only 10 years.
- One evening in March 1891 he arrived at his parent’s home severely ill and two days later he died of Diphtheria.
- Young son died of the same affliction soon afterwards.
- Camille Pissarro lamented Seurat’s passing: ‘imagine the distress of all who followed him – it is a great loss to art.’

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A Sunday on La Grande Jatte 1884

‘Remember that a painting, before it is a warhorse, a nude or some anecdote or other, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order’. ²

Maurice Denis (1870–1943)

The painting was first displayed in Paris May 1886 at the final Impressionist exhibition.

Two other artists refused to have Seurat’s painting exhibited alongside their own and his painting was to be viewed separately in the last room of the show.

The picture was largely ignored by critics but championed by critic, Félix Fénéon who boldly stated that what was important about the painting was its revolutionary technique.

In 1900 Lucie Breu Cousturier was the first proud owner of the painting after her father bought it for her from Seurat’s family for 800 francs.

Several decades later the astute American art collector (and trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago) Frederick Clay Bartlett purchased the painting from Lucie for $20,000 and soon the U.S. owned the painting.

In the summer of 1924, Seurat’s painting was proudly displayed at the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1930 a French consortium was unsuccessful in reportedly offering huge sums of money to reacquire the painting.

French officials say the painting is the only true great French masterpiece that is not in France.

La Grande Jatte in French means a shallow bowl or basin. It is now the name of an affluent suburb of Paris.

In 1958 it left Chicago for the first time in 30 years.

The painting was on loan to MOMA in New York for a major exhibition of Seurat. This remains the first and last time the picture was lent to another gallery.

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Taking a closer look at Seurat’s A Sunday on La Grande Jatte - 1884

- What is the mood of the painting?
- Describe the painting as you would to someone who has never seen it. ‘Paint a picture’ with words as you portray the subject, style of painting, use of colour and anything that puzzles you.
- What is the focus of the painting? What are you immediately drawn to upon first look?
- What is the relevance, if any, of the little girl in the painting?
- How does the Neo-Impressionist style of the painting, sometimes known as the Pointillist technique, add to the overall effect of the work?
- How can you tell the artist is interested in painting light effects?
- What indications can you find that this work is about:
  a) colour?
  b) the process of looking
- Consider the clothing and activity, stance and posture of the figures in the painting. Discuss what the different people are doing.
- In what ways could this painting be seen as a social commentary on Parisienne lifestyle in the late 19th century?
  c) Why do you think this painting was such a rich source of inspiration for Sondheim?
- Can you suggest an alternative title that would fit the painting?
- Create your own story using this painting as inspiration.
- Why might this image have been used so often in popular culture?

Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism

Impressionism (1863 – 1890)

- First exhibition held in Paris 1874 including paintings by Cezanne, Degas, Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley, Berthe Morisot and others.
- The paintings were received with mockery and indignation from the public and the critics and were labelled, rather unflatteringly, the Impressionists.
- The style of painting was ridiculed and laughed at, as it was different to the relatively refined brushwork and careful finish of the usual Paris Salon painting.
- The paintings were produced with broad, impetuous strokes in a free style, often outside (en plein air).
- The artists focused on landscapes and images of the Modern world including the streetscapes of Paris.
- The artists were attempting to capture fleeting sensations of nature and passing glimpses of the world.
**Neo-Impressionism (1886 – 1891)**

- Seurat’s new technique of precisely laying down dabs of pure complementary colours side by side on the canvas received a largely negative response. Words like ‘bedlam’, ‘scandal’ and ‘hilarity’ were used to describe the painting.

- Art critic Félix Fénéon, an anarchist and supporter of the movement, christened the new style ‘Neo-Impressionism’ (new Impressionism).

- Seurat looked to recent explanations of optics and colour perception as the basis for his new methods.

- He was influenced by chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul who produced ‘The Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colours’. For example, if two complementary colours are put together such as red and green, the red appears redder and the green, greener.

- Charles Blanc’s invention of the Colour Wheel also informed Seurat’s practice.

- Seurat believed that if the right colours were used they would create a luminosity that couldn’t be created by mixing colours.

- The complementary colours don’t actually blend but the combination of colours creates a pleasant, animated, lively surface.

- The Neo-Impressionists condemned the mixing of paint on a palette believing that this created a greyish sludge. They used pigments that were broken down into their pure, constituent hues. The painters had to choose and distribute their colours carefully in order to achieve specific harmonic effects.

- This arrangement of colours created a clash on the canvas causing a flicker of light on the retina of the viewer’s eye which resulted in a bright luminous effect.

- Seurat was looking for a way to make the physical substance of oil paint generate the luminosity and radiance of real light.

- Paul Signac was a dedicated follower and friend of Seurat and developed his own style using this technique. (Camille and Lucien Pissarro were also followers for a time).

- The Neo-Impressionists painted modern, urban scenes, landscapes and seascapes.

- Unlike the ephemeral moments captured by the Impressionists, the Neo-Impressionists sought to create a more long lasting and universal statement.

- They were criticised for being too mechanical and methodical in the application of paint and in composition.

**PRE-VISIT EXPLORATION**

Prior to viewing the opera inspired by *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte -1884*, prompt students to consider the origin of creative inspiration. Ask the students to reflect on how music, relationships, other artists, books, major life events etc. might affect their own creative practice.

**QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES**

- Discuss how different art forms influence each other:
  a) Historic tales inspiring modern films
  b) A muse compelling the creative urge of a painter
  c) Poems inspiring paintings
  d) A painting inspiring an opera

- Invite the students to comment on contemporary examples such as the classic *Emma* written by Jane Austen in 1815, which was the inspiration for the 1995 film *Clueless*.

- Introduce students to some images of the Impressionist style of painting and a Neo-Impressionist painting by Paul Signac at the National Gallery of Victoria.
Recommended viewing at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV):

- Claude Monet, Vetheuil, 1879
- Paul Cézanne, The Uphill Road, 1881
- Édouard Manet, The House at Rueil, 1882
- Claude Monet, Rough Weather at Etretat, 1883
- Camille Pissarro, The banks of the Viosne at Osny in grey weather, winter 1883
- Paul Signac, Gasometers at Clichy, 1886

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Ask students to respond to the following questions about one work of art selected from the NGV list:

- How does this painting make you feel?
- If you stepped inside the painting, what would you see, smell and hear?
- Find descriptive words to depict the colours, lines, textures and forms in the painting.
- Create your own title for the painting.
- What do you think the artist was trying to achieve?
- Why do you think the artist had to struggle for critical acceptance when the painting was made?
- Compare the work of art with another painting created before the advent of Impressionism.
- How is the subject matter different?

DURING YOUR GALLERY EXPERIENCE

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

- Look at the paintings closely to examine the brushwork as well as technique and subject.
- If you could touch the surface of the canvas, what would it feel like? Rough, smooth, scratchy, coarse, uneven?
- When looking at Signac’s painting Gasometers at Clichy (1886), remember that terms like ‘divisionism’, ‘spotted’, ‘dabbed’ and ‘network of dots’ were used to describe the Neo-Impressionist style. Use your own words to describe the technique you think the painter has used.
- Discuss how long a painting such as this would take to create. What creative restrictions, if any, are there in painting such a work of art?
- What do you notice about the titles of Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist paintings?
- Imagine you are situated in Signac’s Gasometers at Clichy landscape. What is it like to be there?
DURING YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

- Is there any evidence of Seurat’s painting composition in the stage design or the set?
- What other aspects of the performance remind you of Seurat’s painting? (Consider costume, mood, colour, pace, movement).
- Do you agree that the original painting and the opera are both richer from the connection that has been created between them? Discuss.
- What is the story told and is it relevant today?
- Consider the elements of Art: colour, line, form, texture. Which musical equivalent of these can you hear in the opera?
- There are many aspects vying for attention during an opera. Maintain an awareness of:
  a) The story and the lives of the characters
  b) Set design and use of props / stage
  c) Costume design: look for colour, movement and changing fashion
  d) The use of language and voices

POST-VISIT REFLECTION

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

- Compare and contrast an Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist painting of choice. Seek out similarities and differences and comment on what has been achieved and what you believe has been less successful.
- Do you think Divisionism and Pointillism were effective terms to describe the Neo-Impressionist movement? Discuss.
- What are the similarities and differences between Art and Opera?
- Imagine you are one of the people in Seurat’s A Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884. Write a description of that person or a monologue.
POST-VISIT REFLECTION (CONT.)

**QUESTIONS**

- It is said that Seurat tried to convey a more permanent image of a landscape rather than its momentary appearance. Do you agree that he achieved this? If so, how? If not, how did he fail in this attempt?
- Seurat transcribed what he considered the lasting essence of reality. What aspects of *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884* are real and unreal?
- Give examples of contemporary artists who search for purity of light and colour in their practice as Seurat did.
- How has technology enhanced our understanding and use of colour?
- The foundation of Seurat’s theoretical framework was the difference between coloured light and coloured pigment. Does this search for purity of light and colour exist in today’s artistic practice? Has technology enhanced our understanding and use of colour or has it impaired a sense of true colour?
- What are the ways that we seek to explore colour and light in contemporary art?

- Discuss whether you agree or disagree with this statement

  ‘At the time of exhibiting, many viewers of paintings by Seurat and Signac complained that their pictures were indistinguishable one from another. This was an understandable reaction given the deliberate impersonality of the pointillist technique’."3

- Consider and discuss how science can contribute to the creative process.

  ‘Seurat was actually seeking a way to make the physical substance of oil paint generate the luminosity and radiance of real light. Simply stated, Seurat’s entry into the realm of science focussed on the way the eye sees and way coloured light, as well as coloured pigment, behaves’."4

- Discuss the way harmony is used effectively in both painting and music (with examples).

  *Georges Seurat in his letter to Maurice Beaubourg, 1890 states that, ‘Art is harmony. Harmony is the analogy of contrary elements and the analogy of similar elements of tone, color and line, considered according to their dominants and under the influence of light, in gay, calm, or sad combinations’.*"5

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QUESTIONS

• View this clip from the 1986 John Hughes cult film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. It provides a glimpse into the characters’ experience of Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte - 1884.*
  a) The iconic Seurat painting was a favourite of Hughes’ and he described the Art Institute of Chicago as “a place of refuge”.
• What do you think was meant by this comment?
  b) In the scene, the character ‘Cameron’ is mesmerised by the Seurat painting. Hughes is paying homage to his favourite painting as well as exploring the profound impact that art can invoke. A visual dialogue is taking place between a man and a painting.
• Discuss this dialogue and describe the scene.
• Consider a time when art has had a profound impact in your own life.
REFERENCES & FURTHER READING


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