

**"Snow, Boulevard de Clinchy, Paris," Paul Signac, 1886,  
#61.36.16 – G355**



**Questions:**

- 1) What feelings does this painting evoke in you?
- 2) Imagine you are one of the figures in this painting. What is the temperature? What sounds do you hear? How does the snow feel beneath your feet? What kind of snow is it – a cold, wet snow perfect for snowballs or a drier, fluffy powder good for skiing? Is it slippery? Does the weather make you want to linger or move quickly to get where you are going?
- 3) How has the artist used color, texture and shape to create those physical sensations?
- 4) How many colors can you find in the snow? Look for dots and dashes of color.
- 5) What time of day is it? How can you tell?
- 6) How does this scene compare to a winter's day in Minnesota?
- 7) Compare Signac's pointillist snowy scene with one of the same boulevard painted 10 year before by Impressionist Norbert Goeneutte [below]?

**Paul Victor Jules Signac** (Nov. 11, 1863- Aug. 15, 1935) – Neo-Impressionist painter who, with Georges Seurat, helped develop the pointillist style. Largely self-

taught, Signac was a terrific painter: tough, contemplative, highly sensitive to color and gifted in the organization of forms. He was also prolific: In addition to oil paintings and watercolors, he created etchings, lithographs, and many pen-and-ink sketches composed of small, laborious dots based on scientific color theory popular at the time. For this, Signac was grouped with the "scientific Impressionists" – also called the Neo-Impressionists.

Signac was blessed with a precocious, literate, inquisitive and gregarious nature and soon entered the hothouse of the Parisian avant garde. As president of the Société des Artistes Indépendants from 1908 until his death, he encouraged younger artists, buying their paintings and including the controversial works of the Fauves and the Cubists in exhibitions. Signac particularly inspired Henri Matisse and André Derain, playing a decisive role in the evolution of Fauvism. He also wrote several influential works on art theory, including "*From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*" (1899). In this manifesto, Signac asserted that Neo-Impressionism was the inevitable conclusion of 19<sup>th</sup> century French painting.



**"Portrait of Paul Signac," George Seurat, 1890, private collection**

Signac was born in Paris on 11 November 1863, the son of a well-to-do Parisian merchant, harness maker and 'saddler to the Emperor.' When his father died in 1880, Signac was left a considerable fortune and never had to work a regular job.

In 1880 at 17, Signac met Paul Gauguin at the fifth Impressionist exhibition when Gauguin caught him sketching from a Degas and escorted him out with the stern admonishment: "One does not copy here, sir."

Signac started training in architecture before deciding at age 18 to pursue a career as an Impressionist painter after attending an exhibit of Claude Monet's work. In 1884 he met Monet. Until 1885, he served a sort of apprenticeship with Monet and, to a lesser extent, to Armand Guillaumin, Renoir and Pissaro, producing Impressionist-type landscapes.

At 21, he became an organizing member of the Salon Des Indépendants, formed to arrange exhibitions of their own works, which were rejected by the Impressionist-dominated official salons. It was there, in 1885, that he met Georges Seurat – four years his senior – becoming a close friend, supporter and colleague.

Signac was struck by Seurat's systematic working methods and his theory of colors. He soon abandoned the short brushstrokes of Impressionism to experiment with scientifically juxtaposed small dots of pure color, intended to blend not on the canvas but optically in the viewer's eye – in what would become known as **divisionism** or **pointillism**. Signac influenced Seurat's choice of color, convincing him to banish earthy colors from his palette. Seurat affected Signac's choice of stroke. Like Seurat, Signac wanted to translate accurately and objectively the effects of light, color and atmosphere in nature, while giving as organized and coherent an account of his sensations as possible. Both sought rigor and system, not impressionistic spontaneity. Each influenced the other. Together they developed the pointillist style.

The Neo-Impressionists were meticulous in their approach, making many studies and sketches before painting final works. In this way, they were opposed to the Impressionists who tried to catch the spirit of the moment only. The Neo-Impressionists were influenced by the growing interest in science and technology at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were especially influenced by theorists as Ogden Rood and Michel Eugène Chevreul, who held that light and color are carefully controlled by specific laws based on the juxtaposition of two colors. The interaction between two colors produces a third, in the eye of the viewer – more intense than anything then available from paint dealers. Colors applied in small dots would build up forms by their mass and coloristic interaction.

Signac made his debut as a Neo-Impressionist in the spring of 1886, when his "*Modistes*" was exhibited next to Seurat's "*A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*" at the *eighth and final Impressionist exhibition*. Signac already owned an important landscape by Cezanne, which he studied obsessively and had completed his then-masterpiece, "*The Dining Room*." [below]

In 1886 Signac met Vincent van Gogh in Paris. In 1887 the two artists regularly went to Asnières-sur-Seine together, where they painted such subjects as river landscapes and cafés. Initially, Van Gogh admired Signac's loose painting technique. In March 1889, Signac visited Van Gogh at Arles. The next year he made a short trip to Italy, seeing Genoa, Florence, and Naples.

Every Monday, Symbolist intellectuals and Neo-Impressionist friends met at Signac's studio (in the neighborhood that "Snow" depicts), where they had long discussions for which he was the theoretician. Signac became a spokesman for the group and their work, which was regularly assailed by critics. By 1891, Signac had virtually been anointed as the successor to Seurat, who died that March.

Politically, Signac was an anarchist, as were many of his friends, including Félix Fénéon and Camille Pissarro. He voiced strong social concerns throughout his life. Some of his first paintings, from the early 1880s, reflect these sympathies in his choice of gritty, untraditional subjects, such as gas tanks in the working class suburb of Clichy (where the MIA's painting was also set). He regarded the **direct touch of the artist's brush as symbolic of his socialist belief in the**

**importance of the individual**, and the collective harmony of the brushstrokes as analogous to the equality that should characterize an ideal society. [Lehman collection catalog]

Signac's monumental "*In the Time of Harmony*" (1893-95) sets out to depict the joys of anarchist cooperation: free love, picnics, games of boule on the beach, farm labor made easy by steam-powered reaper. [below]

He kept meticulous lists of his works, giving the precise name of the place from which he painted landscape scenes and the times he worked on them. He looked for scenes that were quintessentially French – civilized, accessible, even ordinary – painting with cool detachment and clarity. Like Monet, he did series paintings, such as beach scenes painted in Collioure. Unlike Monet, who used identically sized canvases for serial work, Signac conceived of the paintings individually and used different sized canvases. Unusually for Signac, there are no surviving preparatory sketchy for this series. Much like Monet's work, each picture displays a different quality of light, indicating that Signac worked on one painting in the morning and three in the afternoon.

Signac married Berthe Roblès in Paris in 1892. Witnesses including Alexandre Lemonier, Maximilien Luce, Camille Pissarro and Georges Lecomte. In November 1897, the Signacs moved to a new apartment in the *Castel Béranger*, built by Hector Guimard. In December of 1892, they acquired a big, rambling house called *La Hune* in the small, quiet fishing village of Saint-Tropez, which Signac "discovered" long before tourists did. For the next 20 years, he spent part of every year there, entertaining his Neo-Impressionist friends and working in the vast studio he had constructed in 1898. *La Hune* still belongs to his descendants.

Signac loved sailing and traveled the coasts of Europe, piloting a small boat to almost all the ports of France, Holland and the Mediterranean as far as Constantinople. Along the way, he painted the landscapes and seascapes, which benefitted from his lifelong observation of the effect of light water. He also began using sequential opus numbers - like those used in music - in some of his titles, calling attention to their visual rhythms. He christened one of his boats, an 11-m cutter, in homage to Edouard Manet's infamous nude, the ***Olympia***.

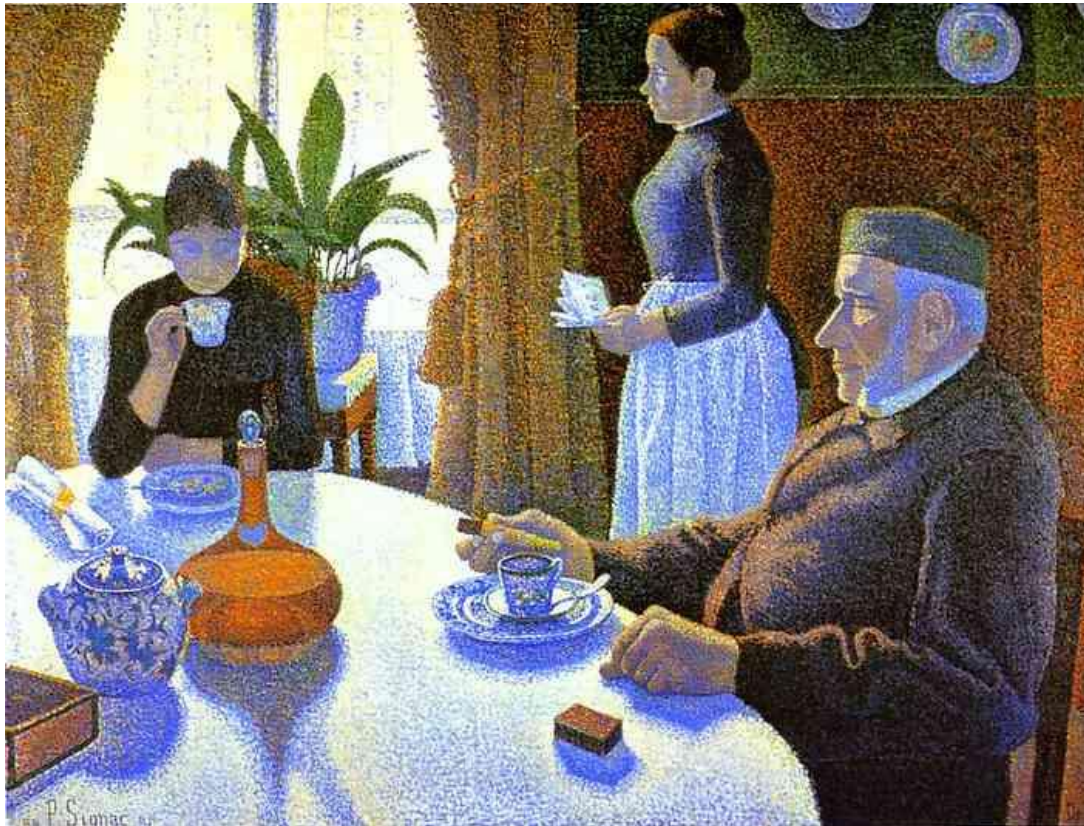
Signac returned from various ports of call with vibrant, colorful watercolors, sketched rapidly from nature. From these sketches, he painted large studio canvases that are carefully worked out in small, mosaic-like squares of color, quite different from the tiny, variegated dots previously used by Seurat. Under the influence of Turner, whose luminous watercolors and oils he adored, Signac plunged into fantasies of radiant color that weren't governed by the theoretical system with which Seurat is forever associated.

Gradually, Signac's technique was transformed. He abandoned pointillism for a kind of square, mosaic brushwork and violent color harmonies. The series of water colors which he began in 1900 – simple and spontaneous – are among his best work.

In September 1913, Signac rented a house at Antibes, where he settled with Jeanne Selmersheim-Desgrange, who gave birth to their daughter Ginette in 1913. In the meantime Signac had left *La Hune* as well as the *Castel Beranger* apartment to Berthe: they remained friends for the rest of his life. On April 6, 1927, Signac adopted Ginette, his previously illegitimate daughter.

Signac died in Paris from septicemia on Aug. 15, 1935, at the age of 72.

Altogether, Signac had what comparatively few artists had – an **enviably happy life**. He was well-off and generous in buying his friends' pictures. He was talented. He loved the sea and was able to exercise that love by constantly cruising the Mediterranean coast of France. He was an energetic and talented writer, an avid reader and bibliophile and an ardent backer of the avant-garde in the days when that word actually meant something. [Time Magazine, Hughes]



**"The Dining Room," Paul Signac, 1886/7, Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands.**



***"In the Time of Harmony"***

**"Snow, Boulevard de Clichy, Paris":**

- Minnesotans know the poetic beauty that recently fallen snow can evoke. Signac creates that same effect in his "Snow, Boulevard de Clichy, Paris," showing city streets softened and transformed by snow – imparting to the prosaic scene a dream-like veil and delicately poetic effect. He captures the atmospheric stillness of a snowy day. A flat light banishes all deep shadows.
- Signac was 23 when he painted "Snow." He recorded it as No. 128 on the list he kept of his works. Later, he specified that it had been painted in January, 1886. This is early Signac, the colorist who "decks the corners of Paris with clear light" (Arsene Alexandre). The accents are sharply pronounced in the trees and passersby.
- This painting was Signac's **foray into the technique of pointillism**, considered revolutionary at the time, in which he made extensive use of the dot – first widely used by Seurat in his reworking of his "Grande Jatte." It marks the founding years of Neo-impressionism.

- Other artists, such as Rousseau had been applying paint in a pointillist way [as in the MIA's "Lake Geneva" painting], but not with the same intention and effect as Signac. [Patrick Noon interview] Signac painted this work before becoming a systematic Divisionist. This evocation of Paris still shows complete freedom in Signac's technique, the **brushstrokes being comma-shaped** rather than dots.
- This painting created a sensation with his scientific, logical approach when Signac presented it in May, 1886, at the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition - the same year George Seurat exhibited his "*Sunday Afternoon on the island of La Grande Jatte.*" Compared with "*La Grande Jatte,*" Signac's "*Snow*" was small and modest. Seeing this and other Signac works, Symbolist writer Paul Adam wrote: "Still very young, Signac possesses admirable tone: a sense of Parisianism, but a Parisianism that avoids caricature and ugliness." Both Signac's and Seurat's works were controversial at the show. Pissarro had begun assimilating their pointillist style and brought them into the show; that was one of the many causes of dissension in the group that year.
- In this work, Signac **tentatively** developed the opposition of complementary hues, especially blue and orange-red in the guard post and adjacent tree at right, and to a lesser extent, scattered across the buildings and pavements. He did not deploy color systematically. Rather he used it primarily, as the Impressionists did, to express light and shade, to describe features and to furnish vivid and enlivening contrasts to the predominate tones.
- To the average eye, the scene might be that of a colorless day. With Signac's eye and method, the painting vibrates with a luminosity that belies the cold, wet weather. The white snow is composed of perhaps a dozen unmixed colors. The snow is softened by other elements that seem to add intimacy and warmth - the violet sky and twinkling lights. It suggests a world of color beyond what the naked eye can see. Moreover, what in a close-up view might appear chaotic, at the proper distance is a model of perfect order and beauty. [JAMA] The artist's touch seems to dance with the snowflakes.
- Signac applied dots and dashes of color on the canvas, juxtaposing complementary colors - believing that the eye would mix them. He did this intending to create an optical effect that was closer to nature. Signac was well aware of color theory as practiced by Delacroix and Constable, who in his landscapes included multiple greens, as they appeared in nature - not

just a single perfect green mixed on the palette, as most Salon painters did in Constable's era. [Patrick Noon]

- "Snow, Boulevard de Clinchy" shows Signac as a **"highly original painter."** This is the "next step in the development of painting toward abstraction." Signac was very influential – more so than Seurat. Look at Matisse and Braque. "They're actually looking at Cezanne and Signac more than Seurat, who advanced the color theory, but produced many fewer works than Signac. Seurat worked on a huge scale and didn't produce that much work, whereas Signac was prolific well before the 20<sup>th</sup> century." [Patrick Noon].
- **Fun fact:** The snow in this scene would have been far whiter and brighter when Signac painted them. That is because Signac painted this scene on pure white linen. The painting has never been lined. Signac intentionally left significant areas of the canvas exposed, raw – without color. The linen has discolored with age and atmosphere. The areas that are now brown would originally have been white. It would have looked even more like a Minnesota winter. So we're actually missing something visually from the original effect Signac created. [Patrick Noon] But, as we Minnesotans know, when the snow begins to be trampled, a certain amount of grit shows through!
- Signac leaves a void in the middle of the composition – space, perhaps, for the viewer to stand, as if ready to walk into the composition. He daringly situates everything on the periphery, filling what traditionally would be the most important part of the view - nearly half – with tracks in the snow.
- With small, controlled touches, Signac interweaves contrasting and often complementary colors into his compositions. His technique is mixed, with dots and dashes for the snow, large crisscross strokes for the sky, broad flat patches for the buildings and pavements and long dragged touches in the trees. All are loosely covered with an overlay of dots of varying sizes and shapes. Individual brushstrokes draw attention to themselves.
- The falling snow, shimmering light and angular filigree of trunks and branches presented Signac with suitable challenges for his recently evolved technique. He adapted his disciplined brushwork in a given area to the description of the local features and effects, but also used it to create a mobile and integrated surface for his painting.
- Though gentle and dreamy with its blue-grays and white and distant haze, contains a surprising amount of lively color in the buildings and lamp, which seems to be lit early against the oncoming twilight.



- The setting of the picture, Boulevard de Clichy (duh **KLEE**-shee), is one Signac must have seen quite often. At near right is the striped stonework of a guard post, a spot not far from Signac's studio at 130 Boulevard de Clinchy, which he rented in 1886, the year he painted this work. The surrounding neighborhood was one of the poorest in the city, traditionally associated with art and artists. Aspects of the boulevard were frequently painted by such Impressionists as Renoir, Pissarro and Monet, who worked there. Van Gogh painted the same scene a year later in a different season from across the street.
- The painting's composition is built on the proportions of the Golden Section: The three strong verticals on the right (two trees and the lamppost), which are transected by the red parallel lines of the building, are closest to the viewer and therefore have the most intense color. The remaining two-thirds of the canvas has an upward-sweeping curvilinear pattern, which, in echoing the circle of the sidewalk in the right foreground, leads the eye into the distance.
- Signac's best paintings were during this era – the late 1880s and early 1890s. The danger inherent in pointillism was that all those microdots, if their tonal relations were not perfectly controlled could look like a bad case of measles. In his middle years, Signac almost always avoided this. [Hughes]
- The principle of color separation was called *Divisionism*, the technique of application *Pointillism*, the movement *Neo-Impressionism*. The term Pointillism was confined to the use of dots, or "points." Divisionism was the broader term and included the use of juxtaposed strokes or even patches of color. [JAMA]

From Signac's 1899 book, "**From Eugene Delacroix to neo-Impressionism**" :

- Signac wrote that it was a mistake to think that Neo-Impressionists cover the canvases with little multicolored spots. "The Neo-Impressionist does not **stipple**, he **divides**. This involves an optical mixture of pigments that are pure; a separation of different elements (color, lighting colors, their reactions); the balance of these elements and their proportion; Choosing a touch that is proportionate to the size of the painting."

- Signac writes that Neo-Impressionists avoid mixing pigments on their palettes. Instead, they “juxtapose them in **clear and small brush strokes** and through optical mixture” obtain the desired results. When pigments are mixed they tend to darken and lose their color. By contrast, optical mixtures produce clarity and brilliance. Signac writes that Delacroix was well aware of this effect. He especially noted that it was “indispensable to apply green and purple one after the other and not mix them. Mixed together, they would have produced a dull and soiled tint. Juxtaposed they create a fine and pearly gray.”

The Impressionists’ theories of color started with Eugene Chevreul, the French chemist, who had been appointed director of the dyeing department at the Gobelins tapestry factory in Paris. His principal thesis was that colors in proximity influence and modify one another. He also observed that any color seen alone appears to be surrounded by a faint aureole of its complementary color – that is, a red spot on a white ground will seem to tint its background green. Chevreul also investigated what is known as optical mixture; in experimenting with woolen threads he found that two threads of different dye appear to have a single color when seen together from a distance. [“Impressionism,” Phoebe pool]

**Quotes:**

*“The anarchist painter is not the one who will create anarchist pictures, but the one who will fight with all his individuality against official conventions. “*

- **Paul Signac**

*“The golden age has not passed; it lies in the future. “*

- **Paul Signac**

**Compare Signac's pointillist snowy scene with one of the same boulevard painted by Impressionist Norbert Goeneutte 10 years before:**



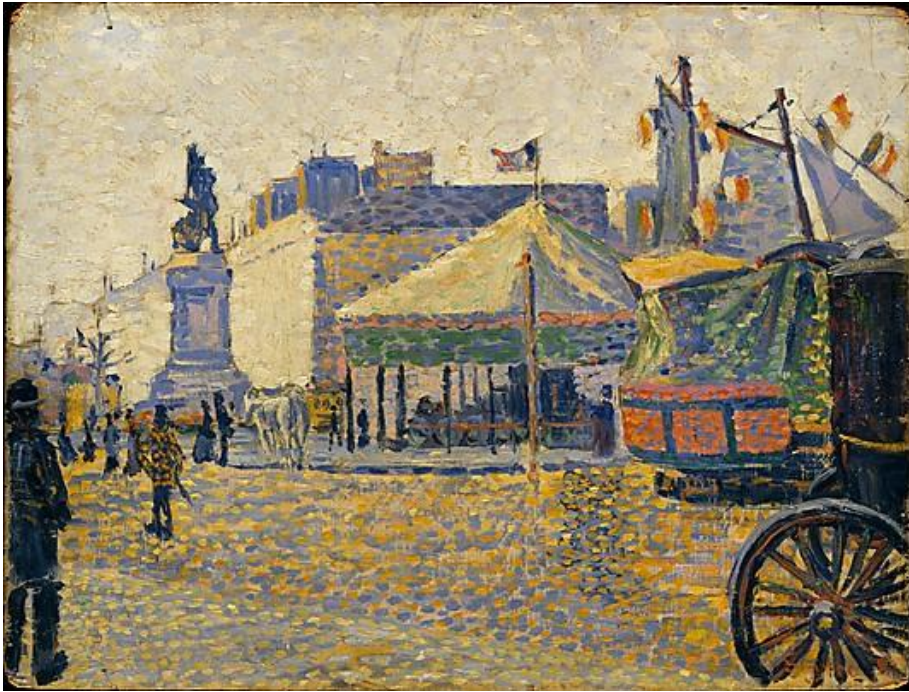
**"The Boulevard de Clichy Under Snow", Norbert Goeneutte, 1876, Tate Britain**

**Signac's snow scene may have influenced van Gogh's 1887 "Boulevard de Clichy," now in Amsterdam:**



**"Boulevard de Clichy," Van Gogh, 1887, Van Gogh Museum,**

Signac's Place de Clichy in another season:



**"Place de Clichy," Paul Signac, 1888, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY**



**Today: Boulevard de Clichy Paris**

**Resources:**

Patrick Noon, MIA Patrick and Aimee Butler Chair of Paintings, Paintings Department Head, interview Nov. 22, 2011.

<http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/Expressionism/Readings/SignacDelaNeo.pdf>  
[excerpts "From Eugene Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism" (1899)]

"The Signac Syndrome," Trevor Winkfield, *Modern Painters* 14, No. 3, Aut, 2001.

"Impressionism," Phoebe Pool, *Thames & Hudson*, 1967.

"Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Paintings in the Robert Lehman Collection," Richard R. Brettel, Paul Hayes Tucker and Natalie Hi Lee, Princeton University Press, 2009.

"The Joy of Color," Robert Hughes, *Time Magazine*, Dec. 17, 2001.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Signac](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Signac)

McGraw Hill Dictionary of Art, Vol. 5, New York, 1964. Pp. 174-5.