The Misconceptions of A Sunday Afternoon

Nicholas Antonacci
James Madison University
Georges Seurat’s painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* was completed nearly 200 years ago, yet it is the focal point of one of the most famous scenes in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and has been shown in episodes of *Looney Tunes*, *Family Guy*, and *The Office*. To the average viewer, it might seem like an amateur painting that is blurry and uneventful. Yet if this were any ordinary work of art, it would not still be relevant in popular culture; it is truly a masterpiece. In the painting, often abbreviated as *A Sunday Afternoon*, Seurat uses pointillism and emotional detachment to portray the both the physical and cultural environment of the island. Although some popular critics and many average viewers have insisted that his depictions of the lives in
the painting are too robotic and depressing, that is the very message Seurat was trying to convey to his viewers.

Seurat’s two-year long process of creating this work of art was completed in 1886 in France. His intended audience was not limited to art enthusiasts, as nearly everyone could enjoy a group of people lazing around on a beautiful day. According to Robert Herbert’s book *Seurat: Drawings and Paintings*, Seurat’s motive for the painting was to evoke permanence by recalling the art of the past. He was inspired by Egyptian and Greek sculptures as well as Italian Renaissance frescoes. The artist himself explained to the French poet Gustave Kahn, “The Panathenaeans of Phidias formed a procession. I want to make modern people, in their essential traits, move about as they do on those friezes, and place them on canvases organized by harmonies of color” (Herbert 86). He put the current people of France on a pedestal so that the rest of the world could understand the society. He wanted ordinary people to be the subjects of his painting. The island itself is located on the Seine River. During Seurat’s history, it represented a high-class getaway for Parisian society. He wanted popular societies hundreds of years from now to be able to look at his painting and try to understand what life was like for the people in the painting.

One examination by Linda Nochlin’s book *Seurat’s Grande Jatte: An Anti-Utopian Allegory* concluded that by making the figures lack any uniqueness or articulation, there is no meaning to be interpreted, story to be actualized or hidden meaning to be discovered (Nochlin). Modern day opinions of Seurat’s work seem to concur in most part with Nochlin’s critiques. Nochlin, as well as ordinary viewers, perpetuate a misconception when discussing this painting. There is indeed a story to be
interpreted, and the hidden meanings can be discovered by using the rule of thirds and examining body language.

In the nineteenth century, Seurat was part of the Impressionist movement, a style in which the artist captures a glimpse of a scene. According to John Clancy, the main concerns of Impressionists were the effects of light on an object and the utilization of vivid colors (1). While painting *A Sunday Afternoon*, Seurat used the pointillism technique, which is the method of using tiny dots of paint in a way that, seen at the appropriate distance, achieves the maximum luminosity. In this technique, instead of mixing colors together, Seurat placed minuscule dots of color next to each other in a way that allows the human eye to intermingle the colors, creating the optical illusion of an entirely new color. Seurat used this color theory to create a painting in a way that no one else had done before.

One of the specific techniques used in his Impressionist painting was the art of blending dots to create the impression of color. The most definitive example of this can be shown by looking at the tree mixing with the sky in the upper left corner. The website *Artble* analyzes this famous painting, observing that the sky is blue and the tree is green, but the area where the two objects meet cannot be described by a single color. There is neither a border to the tree nor the sky. Since Seurat used tiny dots to cover this painting, the number of blue dots he used decreased as he went from the sky to the tree, and at the same time, the number of green dots increased. This blending of the dots is an effective strategy of creating aesthetic transitions (“A Sunday Afternoon on the
Island Grande Jatte”). Seurat also used a unique style of shadows that sets his work of art apart from others. Rather than using traditional black shadows, Seurat defined his shadows by the color with which they come into contact. For example, the large shadow towards the front of the painting is not black, but rather a dark color that is a mix between green, yellow, and black. This is a subtle strategy that emphasizes the pointillism brushwork and gives the painting a unique characteristic that sets it apart from stylistically mediocre works of art.

Seurat not only used strategic blending and shadowing in this painting, but another important aspect is the positioning of the subjects. Looking at the people, one will notice that every single person in the painting is either facing toward the viewer or facing sideways—nobody is positioned diagonally. Seurat organized this for a reason: he wanted to point out that the people living on Grande Jatte were very stubborn. They either agree or disagree—there is no in between—just like they are facing completely forward, or turned entirely to the side. Despite the fact that this artwork is known for its complexity and vast number of people in the painting, not a single subject in the painting is making eye contact with one another. According to John Hayes’s book about interpersonal skills, failing to make eye contact with others reveals an apparent lack of interest and lack of confidence (82). Thus, Seurat wanted the audience to believe that the people on the Island of Grande Jatte possess these negative personality traits. In addition to the stubbornness and disinterest of the subjects, they are also shown to be affectless from their facial expressions. Despite the fact that the people are all at a lovely park on a beautiful day, they look dissatisfied, depressed, and detached. Seurat does this is to show that even though the people of the island are materially wealthy, they are definitely not rich in happiness.
In order to find out what Seurat wanted the viewers to focus on in the painting, one can apply the rule of thirds. In Cathy Johnson’s book about painting nature, she explains that the rule of thirds is a guideline that divides a picture plane into thirds vertically and horizontally, and the most important objects are placed on the imaginary crossing lines (48). Applying this idea to Seurat’s painting, two of the crossing lines fall in significant locations. The crossing lines in the upper right are near the man and woman’s stern facial expressions, further emphasizing the depressed culture. The crossing of the lower right lines is located close to a leash that the woman is holding. It is intriguing that the animal on the leash is a monkey, considering it is not an ordinary animal to keep as a pet. In fact, a monkey in French is known as a “singesse,” denoting a prostitute. Seurat included the monkey to further portray that this high-class society was unethical. He argued that the women are bound by a demimonde social class. This is a group of women who are disrespected by society because of their disloyal relationships with wealthy lovers. These important features that occur at the crossing lines show the significance of Seurat’s use of the rule of thirds.

Once the painting has been analyzed, it is clear that Seurat purposefully depicted the Parisians in a negative way. Nochlin and ordinary viewers of *A Sunday Afternoon* overlook this crucial point in their examinations. The emotionless people, their rigid
positions, and the sexual innuendos contribute to Seurat’s purpose: to persuade the spectators that the high-class society of people living on Grande Jatte was stubborn, egocentric, and dissatisfied.

Overall, the main critics of this famous impressionist painting fail to realize the purpose of the work of art, therefore misinterpreting the emotional detachment and lack of enthusiasm as a flaw on Seurat’s end. If the critics completed a thorough rhetorical analysis of the painting, they would realize that Seurat’s reason behind creating this painting was to show that the high-class society of France was emotionless; thus, they would understand why it is a work of art that is universally recognized. This famous painting is currently located in the Art Institute of Chicago, which is a remarkably honorable place to display a work of art. *A Sunday Afternoon* is still shown in current movies and television episodes, so it is important to be able to recognize that it is much more than an amateur painting. Seurat was logical in the reasoning behind every detail of his masterpiece.
Works Cited


