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The Neo-Impressionist Portrait, 1886–1904



Synopsis

Neo-Impressionism, the style pioneered by Georges Seurat (1859–1891), has long been associated with exquisite landscapes and intriguing scenes of urban leisure. Yet the movement's use of dotted brushwork and color theory also produced arresting portraits of unusual beauty and perception. *The Neo-Impressionist Portrait* is the first book to examine the astonishing portraits produced by the most important figures of Neo-Impressionism, including Seurat himself, Henri-Edmond Cross, Georges Lemmen, Maximilien Luce, Paul Signac, Henry van de Velde, Vincent van Gogh, and Théo van Rysselberghe. Essays by esteemed scholar Jane Block detail the emergence of portraiture as a genre within the Neo-Impressionist movement, first in France and then in Belgium, as well as the continuing artistic dialogues between the regions. More than one hundred color illustrations, biographies of seventeen Neo-Impressionist artists, and a catalogue of sixty paintings make up this authoritative book on a key chapter of the Post-Impressionist era.

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Customer Reviews

The Neo-Impressionist Portrait, 1886–1904 offers fresh insights into the astonishing portraits of the Neo-Impressionist movement and, in stunning color illustrations, reveals the remarkable character, context, and diversity of this chapter of the Post-Impressionist era.

Jane Block is Turyn Professor and Head of the Ricker Library of Architecture and Art at the

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Ellen Wardwell Lee is Wood-Pulliam Senior Curator at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

This is the catalogue accompanying the exhibition of Neo-Impressionist portraits at the ING Cultuurcentrum in Brussels from February to May 2014 and then at the Indianapolis Museum of Art from June to September. The Indianapolis Museum has one of the most extensive collections of Neo-Impressionist art in America, thanks to the years-long activity of its Senior Curator, Ellen Wardwell Lee, one of the volume's co-editors. This is an exceptional show which has gathered works from over twenty-five institutions, and it is apparently the first time that an exhibition has been devoted solely to the Neo-Impressionist portrait. It should be said right away, though, that the title of the exhibition might well have been more precise; many people refer broadly to painters like Gauguin and Cézanne, for example, as Neo-Impressionists, and they also painted portraits, but their styles of painting are not what this show is about. It is rather specifically the "divisionist" or "pointillist" style in the manner of Georges Seurat that unites these painters, their technique of "dividing" pure colors into "points" on the canvas and allowing them to combine in the viewer's eye rather than on the artist's palette and of exploiting the harmonization of complementary colors. That was what Félix Fénéon had in mind when he coined the term in 1886, its major current, and, as this catalogue makes clear, a powerfully expressive one when brought to bear on the representation of the human image. Two scholarly essays precede the catalogue. Both are by Jane Block, a professor of art history at the University of Illinois who has written extensively about Neo-Impressionism and is the volume's other co-editor. She traces the development of the style from its first appearance in exhibitions in Paris, both of the Impressionists and the Independents, through its Belgian permutations in the exhibitions of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, to its final influence in Germany. The parameters of the exhibition are determined by Seurat's exhibition of his "Grande Jatte" at the last of the Impressionist shows in 1886 and the year 1904, when Théo van Rysselberghe, the style's most persistent adherent, finally abandoned the program and when, coincidentally, Cross and Signac spent the summer in St. Tropez painting with Matisse, almost as a signal that Neo-Impressionism's days were done. Dr. Block is keen to point out the ways in which the portrait had a special development within the Neo-Impressionist aesthetic, but her approach is mostly narrative and descriptive and offers little sustained discussion of some of the specifically aesthetic implications of the new style, such as: the luminous "haloes" that some of the artists used to set off figures from their backgrounds; the successive contrast of complementary colors in an ever-widening field of vision (i.e., the green and red dots making up a green chair set on

a red rug made up also of green and red dots and placed against a similarly composed green background, etc.); the use of painted borders, and especially of the convex curved ones of Seurat and Lemmen; indeed why--since colorist theory is at the base of the divisionist aesthetic--was there so much black-and-white portraiture in charcoal and Conté crayon? Such concerns are occasionally addressed in the commentaries to the catalogue plates, which are the heart of the volume, comprising well over half of its pages. There are sixty catalogue exhibits, each reproduced full-page and with great clarity and, in the case of the oils, in excellent color. Seventeen artists are represented, from the well known Seurat (2) and Signac (4) to less familiar figures like Henri Delavallée and William Jelley (1 each). The number of reproductions accorded the artists is approximately in relation to their eminence within the genre rather than their general renown as artists; van Rysselberghe has the greatest representation (14), but Achille Laugé is also prominent (6), as is Georges Lemmen (13). The works range in facture from what one might call the pointillistic purism of Seurat himself through the generally looser application of van Rysselberghe to the apparently rather unconvinced experiment of van Gogh. Some of these works are just stunning: Seurat's Conté crayon portrait of Signac, for example, is a marvel of subtle shading, and van Rysselbergh's paintings of Alice Sæthe and her sister Maria simply jump off the page. Luminosity is perhaps not such a difficult quality to achieve when one is painting a sun-drenched landscape, but to get that quality of light from an indoor exposure, so to speak, is quite a different thing. Each of the plates is expertly commented by one of the show's curators; the discussions are meticulously annotated and are supported by data including provenance, prior exhibitions and a dedicated bibliography. There are also about fifty further illustrations for comparison and reference. In addition, the editors have provided short biographical sketches of the artists (with notes), an extensive compilation of pointillist portraits in oil (including ones not exhibited), a general bibliography and a specialized one for each of the artists, and a comprehensive index. This apparatus will no doubt make the volume especially useful to scholars, but its broad presentation of relatively unfamiliar works and approachable commentary should make it appealing also to general readers interested in Neo-Impressionism and portraiture. This is a fascinating examination of a fairly unexplored corner of nineteenth-century painting, very welcome and very highly recommended.

This book was published for the exhibition in 2 locations: "To the Point: Le portrait neo-impressioniste, 1886-1904" at ING Cultural Centre, Brussels, Belgium, Feb. 19 - May 18, 2014; and "Face to Face: The Neo-Impressionist Portrait, 1886-1904" at Indianapolis Museum of Art, June 15 - Sept. 7, 2014. The exhibition was curated by Jane Block & Ellen Wardwell Lee. The essays are

"The Flowering of Neo-Impressionism amid a Demand for Portraiture" by Jane Block; & "The Neo-Impressionist Portrait: A French & Belgian Dialogue" by Jane Block. A section of 60 full-page color plates of paintings & drawings begins on p. 63. Each plate is accompanied by an entry written by Ellen Wardwell Lee, Jane Block, Marina Ferretti Bocquillon, or Nicole Tamburini. (The author is identified by initials at the end of each entry.) The informative discussion of each work is followed by Provenance, Exhibitions, & Bibliography.

I thought I had a good knowledge of art history but Ms Block's writings brought a whole new perspective to many of the paintings I thought I knew. The choice of Portraiture was inspired!

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