To my mother: Doris Whitehead
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This thesis examines the personal and political relationships between critic Félix Fénéon and anarchist artists in the late 19th century. Fénéon’s assessment of an artist’s commitment to anarcho-communism influenced his criticism, most notably in his treatment of Georges Seurat, the leader of artists that Fénéon called Neo-Impressionists. When Seurat was in Fénéon’s favor, the critic fabricated meetings with the artist explaining Seurat’s supposed scientific application of color. When Seurat did not join fellow Neo-Impressionists in supporting a radical cause, Fénéon did not review several important paintings in Seurat’s short career.

His writings constructed personas for the Neo-Impressionists and made their precise application of color comprehensible to the viewing public. Fénéon’s analyses emphasized the artist’s ability to produce luminescent color. In doing so, Fénéon de-emphasized writing about a picture’s subject matter even though many paintings that received positive reviews depicted themes sympathetic to his own socio-political beliefs.

Fénéon was the spokesman, theoretician and chronicler of the Neo-Impressionists. He established his credibility among the group for being the first critic to
publicly support Seurat’s Divisionist technique that replaced brushstrokes and lines with colored marks and dots. Often signing his writing “F.F.” he was a contradictory figure employed as a government clerk for 13 years while participating in violent anarchist activities against Third Republic France. Leading Neo-Impressionists Paul Signac, Maximillen Luce, Seurat and their critic, Fénéon, were bound together in the post-Paris Commune generation. Along with establishing connections between Fénéon’s relationships and his reviews, this thesis examines this group, including longtime Impressionist Camille Pissarro, with shared artistic and political concerns shaped by the events of 1871.

To better understand the origins of Neo-Impressionism, this thesis provides overviews of the major branches of French anarchist thought and the Symbolist literary movement. Fénéon was a power behind the scenes in Parisian literary and art circles, editing and writing in the independent literary journals that proliferated after press restrictions were relaxed.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Anyone can err, especially a critic. But to express without frivolity or insincerity what one feels – I admire that!
—Félix Fénéon¹

Félix Fénéon was an editor and literary critic whose reviews were published in journals that promoted Symbolist writers in fin-de-siècle France. Coupled with his enthusiasm for literary experimentation, Fénéon also kept pace with new developments in painting and began writing sporadically about art in 1883. He did not consider himself to be a bona fide art critic until he began writing about a new group of painters he called Neo-Impressionists.

Fénéon and these second-generation Impressionists crossed paths in 1886 at what would be the Impressionists’ final group exhibition. Any chance of these newer artists reinvigorating or redefining Impressionism was denied as their paintings were hung together in a back room conspicuously separated from the rest. Here an enormous painting by one of the newer Impressionists, Georges Seurat, depicts Parisians of differing social and economic classes gathered on a public recreation spot under the bright afternoon sun. Impressionist subject matter included leisure and public spaces in daylight, but Seurat and his relegated colleagues used painting methods that undermined Impressionism.

The monumental canvas of Seurat’s *Un dimanche après-midi à l’Île de la Grande Jatte* (figure A-1) is covered with colored dots and marks composed of raw pigment directly applied without preliminary blending on the palette. This painting lacks the expressive brushstrokes that created the representation of spontaneity or sketchiness characterizing Impressionism. Seurat has instead painted static, detached, emotionally restrained figures composed in basic geometric shapes. Artists Edgar Degas, representing a Realist branch of Impressionism, and Camille Pissarro, who backed Seurat’s experimentation, bitterly disagreed with each other about this painting. Fénéon avoided any disputes when he quietly stood before *La Grande Jatte* soaking up every detail.

Neo-Impressionist works by Seurat, Pissarro, Paul Signac and other like-minded artists have since moved from the back room to permanent display in major museums. *La Grande Jatte* is permanently exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago and Seurat’s life has been romanticized in Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Sunday in the Park with George*.

Fénéon never took a brush to canvas but his writings established Neo-Impressionism in the modernist canon. He was the first critic to recognize these new artists, gave their group a name, and produced reviews, monographs, theoretical writings, and catalogues that defined this style and secured its permanent place in art history. Fénéon was an active participant in establishing Neo-Impressionism, often collaborating with Seurat, Signac and Pissarro and maintaining close friendships with these artists. These relationships were based on a shared commitment in anarchism. Fénéon was directly involved in anarchist activities that emerged in the wake of the failed Paris Commune.
Fénéon never overstepped into the frivolity that he disliked. His writing packs perceptive observations and challenging ideas within reviews that avoid dramatic excesses. He was preoccupied with the artist’s ability to effectively depict the interaction of color and light on objects, barely mentioning subject matter nor attempting to structure a narrative in the picture. Neo-Impressionists often painted dilapidated industrial sites, slag heaps, poor living conditions, and class issues that concerned Fénéon and other anarchists. These subjects could have been investigated but Fénéon’s descriptions drew attention away from controversy. In his reviews, objects in a picture were described with the tone of a catalog entry. For La Grande Jatte: “The subject: beneath a sultry sky, at four o’clock, the island, boats slipping past its flank, stirring with a casual Sunday crowd enjoying the fresh air among the trees . . .”

This thesis is an intellectual biography that examines Fénéon’s writing through investigating his politics and his relationships with other artists. It is common knowledge that many of the artists championed by Fénéon shared his anarchist views. However, this thesis contends that the artists’ political commitments affected how Fénéon evaluated their art. His opinions favored those artists sympathetic toward anarchism and his approval shifted to disapproval if he believed an artist strayed from the cause. The prime example is his changing attitude towards Seurat after questioning the artist’s commitment to radical politics. Fénéon abandons Seurat for the firebrand anarchist

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3 Ibid, 83. “Le sujet: par un ciel caniculaire, à quatre heures, l’île, de filantes barques au flanc, mouvante d’une dominicale et fortuite population en joie de grand air, parmi des arbres …”
Signac. The critic’s favorites, Seurat, Signac, Pissarro, Maximilian Luce and Albert Dubois-Pillet, frequently joined him at anarchist meetings. Fénéon’s reviews are published in anarchist-friendly periodicals. After years of praising Paul Gauguin’s paintings and sculptures, Fénéon wrote negative reviews after accusing the artist of profiting off bourgeois exoticism.

Acting as neo-Impressionism’s leading theorist and chronicler, Fénéon had tremendous influence over how these artists and their art would be perceived. The research in this thesis was inspired by John G. Hutton’s book *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Hutton argued that art historians have not fully confronted the anarchism of Neo-Impressionist artists and that cultural historians had generally treated political beliefs peripherally.4

Fénéon’s prolific writing, his dapper attire and sarcastic wit led admirers to dub him an éminence grise driving Paris’ literary and artistic worlds. He also wrote incendiary political commentaries that were unsigned or under fictitious names. Fénéon was a puzzling, contradictory figure who constructed dual identities: for more than a decade he was both a clerk in France’s War Office and an active revolutionary. His reviews were signed with the recognizable “F.F.” but his anonymous writings encouraged artists to produce propaganda outside of easel painting that workers could easily understand. Fénéon’s clandestine activities demonstrate his radical bent. He was arrested for hiding

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4 John G. Hutton. *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University UP, 1994. 3. “The scholarship of art history has all too frequently distorted or even ignored such matters. Even when it has addressed the topics, it has tended to deal with the anarchism of the Neo-Impressionists rather elliptically. For many historians of art and culture, the political beliefs and affiliations of the Neos are at most peripheral, if not merely a curiosity.”
bomb detonators (in the Ministry of Defense) and was a defendant in the Trial of Thirty, a mass roundup of anarchists that the Third Republic hoped would extinguish radical socio-political activities. At his arraignment his mother placed a print of an allegorical figure commemorating the Commune atop their trial dossier⁵ (figure A-2). Fénéon was acquitted. Authorities didn’t know he had committed a more serious crime; Fénéon detonated a bomb that destroyed the Restaurant Foyot. No one was killed although one man, ironically the anarchist poet Laurent Tailhade, lost an eye in the explosion.⁶

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⁵ Albert Boime. *Art and the French Commune: Imagining Paris after War and Revolution.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1995), 168. Fénéon was arrested on April 25, 1894 in connection with the bombing of a restaurant. He was acquitted on Aug. 12, 1894. Jurors voted six against six in his case, but French law allowed the tie to benefit the defendant.

⁶ Halperin, 3. The restaurant was bombed on April 4, 1894. According to Halperin, Fénéon told the wife of a friend he had set off the bomb. The bombing remains unsolved. Also, Pierre Aubery “The Anarchism of the Literati of the Symbolist Period” in The French Review, vol. 42, no. 1 (Oct. 1968), 43. When a bomb was detonated two years earlier in the Chamber of Deputies Tailhade said, “What matter a few colorless victims since this gesture has class!”
CHAPTER 2
PORTRAIT OF AN ANARCHIST

Fénéon was born Louis-Félix-Jules-Alexandre-Elie Fénéon on June 29, 1861 in Turin to a French father, Jules, and a Swiss mother, Marie-Louise (née Jacquin). Jules Fénéon was a traveling salesman from Burgundy seeking business opportunities in Turin and Marie-Louise Fénéon had come from the border town Saint-Maurice to gain employment. The Fénéons soon relocated to Jules’ home in the Charolais region of Burgundy where Fénéons had lived since the seventeenth century. Félix Fénéon’s grandfather had been mayor of a local village and a doctor, but the Fénéon family history consists of unexceptional merchants, ribbon manufacturers and civil servants.7

Calling himself l’homme de letters, Jules’ many jobs included record-keeping at the Bank of France, making so little money that he had to work past retirement age. Marie-Louise supplemented the family income by working in the post office eventually rising to superintendent. Burgundy was predominantly a bucolic region producing conservative people known for saying, “think good thoughts, do good work and let them talk.” Relations between father and son became strained when Félix embraced radical ideas, although his mother steadfastly encouraged her son’s intellectual independence. She came from a region that had resisted assimilation by Switzerland, the Italian Piedmont and France.8

Fénéon’s political awareness began after France’s humiliating defeat to Prussia when he was turning ten, as he took the side of the Communards far away in Paris. The boy was sadly disappointed when a workers’ demonstration in his provincial department


was put down. He was also shaken when the regular French Army (supplemented with freed prisoners of war) massacred 25,000-35,000 men, women and children in Paris during *La Semaine Sanglante*.\(^9\) Always identifying himself with workers and the downtrodden, at 12 he organized school mates into a society pledging to die for the anarchist-communist cause.\(^{10}\)

His mother saved up money hoping to enroll her exceptionally bright son into a private lycée then an uncle offered to pay tuition at the *Ecole Normale Spéciale* at Cluny. He attended for two years until Fénoton’s uncle could no longer subsidize both his own son’s and his nephew’s educational costs. In his final school year (1879) Fénoton attended a public school in Mâcon closer to his family in Lugny. He won more academic prizes and, most importantly, earned the difficult *baccalauréat* (only half the candidates passed) required for university admission. Despite his academic success, Fénoton did not wish to continue his education.\(^{11}\) He was briefly an apprentice reporter against family expectations that he would attend university then follow a respectable career.\(^{12}\)

His anti-institutional attitudes took root at the conservative school that housed an all-male student population in barracks. When the school’s brass band refused to play in a Corpus Christi parade because it was a religious event, the headmaster disbanded the band. Fénoton never forgot this injustice; in one of his early articles he claimed the

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\(^{10}\) Ibid, 28.

\(^{11}\) Ibid, 22-23.

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 29.
presence of religion in schools makes students “dull-witted” and “ripe for all kinds of subservience.”\textsuperscript{13}

Young men of all classes entered compulsory military service lasting five years. Fénéon joined in 1880 taking advantage of the one-year term, the \textit{volontariat}, available to those able to pay 1,500 francs and pass an examination. During his undistinguished stint in the infantry Fénéon placed first in the qualifying examination for a War Office post then was hired as a junior clerk in 1881 (he would work there for 13 years). Fénéon quickly mastered bureaucratic jargon, writing with accuracy and speed despite having difficulty keeping office hours. \textsuperscript{14} Not being a typical “pencil pusher,”, Fénéon often skipped lunch to visit art shows such as the 1881 and 1882 Impressionist exhibitions.\textsuperscript{15}

Having escaped provincial villages, Fénéon transformed himself into a cosmopolitan dandy (figure A-3). An urbane persona that Signac later captured in a portrait was instantly identifiable, almost as much as his writing. Fénéon kept his short-cropped military haircut but shaved off his light-colored beard and mustache leaving only a blond goatee hanging under his chin. Fénéon bathed regularly, used pumice stone on his elbows and knees, and his smooth skin smelled of \textit{cuir de Russie} perfume.\textsuperscript{16} Always elegant without being ostentatious, the tall, thin Fénéon often wore a silk top hat, puce-colored suit, dark red gloves, patent leather shoes, a long coat or cape and carried a cane.\textsuperscript{17} Fénéon’s dandyism subverted class distinctions and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 23. “L’Education spiritualiste” \textit{Revue indépendante}, June 1884.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 31. The reactionary Gen. Georges Boulanger, whom Fénéon hated, wrote in the margin of one of Fénéon’s reports, “One can count on him!”
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 31.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 31.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 16.
\end{flushright}
stratification in French society. As Halperin has noted, Fénéon performed the individual right to construct a self-identity; his dandy appearance constitutes an expression of anarchism.\textsuperscript{18} His choice to wear expensive clothes is another of his paradoxes considering anarchism’s working-class sympathies. The nouveau sophisticate drank up Paris; not only the gas-lighted thoroughfares, galleries, opera houses, and cafés, but the simple bistros where he dined with proletarians. He would wander the city in the wee hours, watching the unloading of farm wagons or learning street slang by diving into Paris’ criminal underworld.\textsuperscript{19}

Observers found him enigmatic calling him \textit{La père Laconique} and \textit{Celui qui silence}.\textsuperscript{20} He would consult books or dictionaries as he engaged in conversation speaking slowly and sparingly seeking exactness. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec called him “la Bouddha” for his outward calm, and the goatee reminded Lautrec of Mephistopheles. Few were able to penetrate Fénéon’s persona. Poet André Breton, one of the founders of Surrealism, said Fénéon’s “outer shell was rough, and slippery.”\textsuperscript{21} Fénéon’s sarcastic quips and ironic twists reinforced his boundaries and expressed scorn at convention. When asked about obscene drawings in public toilets, he replied, “These graffiti are the work of unsung artists who lack means of expression and are the victims of circumstance.”\textsuperscript{22} He enjoyed reciting Symbolist poet Arthur

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 16..
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 33.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 7.
\textsuperscript{21} Idid, 11.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 8.
Rimbaud’s sonnet *Voyelles* in an exaggerated manner.\(^{23}\) Seeing Fénéon hold court at the Café Voltaire, Armand Charpentier called him an “aesthete” and the “prince of ironies.”\(^{24}\) Close friends called him his childhood name “Elie” and said he believed in all forms of beauty. Poet Emile Verhaeren said, “I have seen his face flush with pleasure in front of a canvas.”\(^{25}\) Longtime friend Solange Lemaître said, “If he seemed of contradictions it was, I believe, because he became mature very young.”\(^{26}\)

**Anarchism and his Generation:** Those who were children during the Paris Commune lost their tender years quicker than most in an era of mass chaos, violence, and destruction: this was Fénéon’s, Seurat’s and Signac’s generation. Not quite teenagers in the Commune’s rise and fall, their response to the Communards’ dissolution was to overturn the previous generation’s values. In their efforts to stamp out revolutionaries, the Third Republic unintentionally created conditions for Fénéon’s traumatized generation to unleash repressed energies. This generation collectively felt a calling to thrust a killing stroke aimed at the hearts of all institutions.\(^{27}\) For example,

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\(^{23}\) Ibid, 32. Fabre des Essarts, a friend of Victor Hugo, stated, “In painting his gods were Manet and Puvis de Chavannes; in poetry, Paul Verlaine, Mallarmé, Raymbaud (sic), the author of that famous sonnet *Voyelles*, which good-hearted Fénéon used to recite to all and sundry with melodramatic emphasis …” The opening line of Rimbaud’s *Voyelles*: “A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu : voyelles.”

\(^{24}\) Ibid, 38. “L’esthète Félix Fénéon, prince de ironies….martelait de sonnet des Voyelles d’Arthur Rimbaud…”

\(^{25}\) Ibid, 14.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 8. Solange Lemaître; “He looked at the world with a sorrowing eye. The suffering he observed gave him a kind of rancor … Oh yes, when he was young, perhaps, he enjoyed playing the role of mystificateur. Later, the people he gullied really understood, and he never treated us that way. He had developed a certain gravity, a certain … yes, I can say agony over the human condition. As for him, he believed in beauty: beauty in art, in literature, and moral beauty. The ugliness, the pettiness of man revolted him. ‘There is a flow inside of humanity,’ he would say, as of a flawed gem.”

\(^{27}\) Boime, 140. “The generation that followed the Impressionists experienced the Commune and its repression as a childhood trauma and their attempt to achieve a more monumental expression of modernity represents not only a cyclical or aesthetic response but a social and political riposte growing out of radical energies stimulated by its haunting memories.” Boime claimed that *La Grande Jatte*’s new interpretation of modernity and painting method exemplifies that generation’s ideals.
Seurat’s bourgeois childhood was shattered when his family had to flee their apartment as *La Semaine Sanglante* raged. Upon his return young Seurat discovered the neighboring park, Buttes-Chaumont, was stripped for firewood and the bodies of executed Communards lay in an open ditch. Marxists appeared among the Communards, but Marxism did not have a strong hold on Fénéon’s generation. Fénéon criticized Marxism’s obsession with industrial mechanization and clock-work efficiency, a beehive collectivism that opposed the anarchists’ belief in the power of the individual.

Post-Commune Paris attracted many revolutionaries; a police report stated the city’s political underground contained at least 500 members and 800-1,000 sympathizers in a variety of ever-changing groups. The incendiary anarchist press was briefly chilled when editors of three major anarchist journals were Fénéon’s co-defendants in the *Procès des Trente*. An Italian anarchist fatally stabbed French president Sadi Carnot in 1894 and bombings of governmental and public places escalated. Police spies reported the anarchist Jacques Prolo proclaiming that a successful anarchist revolution required ten to twenty years of violence and two to three million deaths.

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28 Ibid, 171.


31 Hutton, 50. The editors were Emile Pouget of *Le Pére Peinard*, Jean Grave of *La Révolte* and Sebastian Faure of *Le Libertaire*. All were acquitted.

32 Varias, 84.
The anarchism that developed after the Commune was dedicated to overthrowing the Third Republic and replacing it with a decentralized order that abolished private property and wiped away class distinctions. Two factions of anarchism emerged; the militant “propaganda by deed” group that advocated direct violence and the creative artists who followed “propaganda by word.” In her study of anarchism and Neo-Impressionism, Robyn S. Roslak determined that Neo-Impressionists belonged to the latter camp and practiced anarcho-communism formulated by Russian exile Peter Kropotkin, Jean Grave, editor of *Les Temps nouveaux*, and the Belgian geographer Elisée Reclus. What separated anarcho-communism from socialism was the anarchists’ belief in small neighborhood collectives rather the socialism’s nationalized collective. Anarchism’s emphasis on individual freedom, wiping out central authority, aiding the unskilled or homeless that Karl Marx dismissively called *lumpenproletariat*, was incompatible with mainstream Marxism.

Neo-Impressionists formed their own Society of Independent Artists in 1884 that was founded on anarchist principles. They did not have an exhibition jury, each artist paid the same fee, and money from sold paintings was redistributed equally among members. Fénéon and symbolist writers Gustave Kahn and Paul Adam were also closely associated with the group. After Pissarro decided that Impressionism’s depictions of the bourgeoisie were antithetical to radical politics, the longtime anarchist joined the Society and adopted Seurat’s painting method.

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35 Roslak, 173.
Anarchists saw artists just like proletarian workers; victims of the conditions created by capitalist market economies. Following propaganda by word Kropotkin called on all artists of all political ideologies to stand with the working class. Kropotkin issued this challenge; “Place your pen, your pencil, your chisel, your ideas at the service of the revolution.” Kropotkin and Grave were not demanding that artists create blatant pro-anarchist propaganda, on the contrary they believed in artists needed autonomy to challenge conventions, thereby aiding social change without necessarily producing overtly political content. Several Neo-Impressionists contributed illustrations to Grave’s publications and donated paintings to be sold in lotteries that raised money for his newspapers and pamphlets.

By the 1890s many Neo-Impressionists had been influenced by Symbolist writers to experiment with form independent of content. Just as Symbolist poetry employed the musical qualities of vowel sounds, Neo-Impressionists like Signac exploited variations in line, color and tone to create what Debora Silverman called “musical canvases.” The radicalized generation that supported Neo-Impressionists would later be dissatisfied when these artists painted fewer scenes of urban industrial life.

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37 Roslak, 381. Also, Aubery 41, “… a work of art, they maintained, is a highly individual creation, perhaps the supreme manifestation of a man’s individuality. It is in itself propaganda by the deed for it epitomizes the unbounded creativity of the free individual – a basic anarchist tenet.”

38 Silverman, 213.
CHAPTER 3
CRITICAL CHOICES

Fénéon began writing art criticism in his own magazine *Libre revue* in 1883. Art criticism seemed a natural fit since his literary reviews often contained painterly language. He called a collection of poetry “too solid, too rich in red pigment to make one feel the lambent light of the supernatural . . .”39 In reviewing French translations of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and *The Insulted and the Injured*, Fénéon gave the author a painter’s eye: “If (characters) often take on abnormal shapes, it is because the oblique Dostoyevsky is watching them from an angle that alters their proportions . . .”40

Fénéon covered the 1883 Salon in his first art review. Surprisingly, he praised the academic painter Jean-Jacques Henner’s *Andromeda* and re-constructed the well-known myth through the nude female figure’s viewpoint.41 In this same review, Fénéon lambasted the organizers for the dearth of Impressionist works and allowing too many trivial pieces like a sculpture that caused him to remark, “For whom, are guillotines made!”42

Foreshadowing his treatment of Seurat, Fénéon defended Puvis de Chavannes, an artist that did not fit into convenient categories. Puvis painted large easel paintings and wall decorations of landscapes populated with classicized nude or draped figures in emotionally-restrained poses. These works had a limited, muted palette lacking a

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39 Halperin, 37. His review of Symbolist Emile Verhaeren’s *Contes de Minuit* in *Libre revue*, Feb. 16, 1883. In the same review he praised the book’s illustrations by Theo Van Rysselberghe.

40 Ibid, 191.

41 Ibid, 38. “Superb in the tragic shroud of her hair of burnished gold, shivering from the salty vapors brought to her by the sea, Andromeda, her bosom offered up, anxiously questions the passive seas.”

42 Ibid, 39.
recognizable narrative but Puvis’ supporters claimed these scenes depicted an idealized world. Fénéon stated Puvis’ work was “hermetic and symbolic, intelligible only by thinking people” that incorporated “quiet color scales” better fit for decorative art than easel painting. Three years later Fénéon claimed La Grande Jatte’s figures evoked Puvis’ Le Bois Sacré Cher aux Arts et aux Muses (A-4) and he called Seurat “a more modern Puvis de Chavannes.”

The visual characteristics of easel painting that would most draw Fénéon’s attention emerged in his report on the first Édouard Manet retrospective in 1884. This review marks the first time Fénéon discussed the “optical mixture” of colors which would later dominate his Neo-Impressionist writings. Fénéon attended one-man shows for Pissarro, Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley but remained silent about Impressionists until 1886 because he believed these artists already had established critics defending them. Fénéon still rated himself an amateur.

Fénéon’s personal writing style developed through studying Denis Diderot’s art criticism of 18th century Salons. Diderot was one of the leading philosophes or public

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43 Marie-Christine Boucher. “Puvis de Chavannes” in Oxford Art Online.

44 Ibid, 40. “His quiet color scales, discordant in an easel painting, harmonize perfectly with the architectural lines of buildings.”


48 Halperin, Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris, 42.
intellectuals during the Enlightenment who wrote literature, plays, philosophy, criticism, and compiled the *Encyclopédie*. Most important for Fénéon was Diderot’s comprehensive Salon reviews from 1759 to 1781 that combined thorough descriptions with philosophical analysis peppered with Diderot’s strident praise or insults. As Mark Ledbury pointed out, Diderot’s reviews were published in the *Correspondence Littéraire* for a small group of aristocratic subscribers and the magazine was not allowed to circulate in Paris. Since his readership could not bring his reviews to the Salon, Diderot relied on his *ekphrastic* prose to bring painting into view for his readers.\(^{49}\)

It seems fitting that Fénéon, a man who embraced paradox, would admire the fellow *littérature*. Of Diderot, Fénéon wrote “his ink translates every effect of color”\(^{50}\) in admiring Diderot’s appreciation of the nuances of secondary colors and gradations of light and shadow (“half-tones”) that only a few artists can master. But Diderot was a versatile writer able to analyze one artist’s effective application of color then switch to a detailed description of another painting’s narrative. In his Salon of 1763, Diderot described Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin’s mastery of color, “. . . close up, everything blurs, goes flat and disappears. From a distance, everything comes back to life and reappears.”\(^{51}\)

Diderot and Fénéon both believed in art’s transformative effect on the viewer. Diderot wrote that “art at its most magical” could transform the Salon into a church, “a


\(^{50}\) Halperin, 47. “Sur Diderot” Revue independente, Aug. 1884.

delicious freshness prevails there." In that same spirit, Fénéon advised his readers to discover themselves among the masterpieces at the Louvre.

Nineteenth-century Realist critics who supported Impressionism’s brilliant luminosity with vivid color in modern themes shaped Fénéon’s tastes. Edmond Duranty suggested intense sunlight “de-colors” tones therefore artists must break down the unified spectrum like a prism then harmoniously combine luminosity with color. Théodore Duret installed Monet as “Impressionist par excellence” for rendering “fleeting impressions” previously unseen in the Salon. Gustave Geoffroy praised Manet’s “accurate observance of the luminous film of light which envelops everything” that challenged viewers to reject academic artificiality. Symbolist Jules Laforgue praised Impressionism’s rejection of perspective, chiaroscuro, and sharp line, practiced since the Renaissance, creating images “wholly in the vibration of color.”

This generation of critics embraced the modernity expressed in Realist writer Charles Baudelaire’s Painter of Modern Life although self-interest might have shaped their published opinions. Geoffroy, Ernest Chesneau and Roger Marx were among

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52 David K. Holt. “Denis Diderot and the Aesthetic Point of View” in Journal of Aesthetic Education (Vol. 34, No. 1, Spring, 2000), 23. Diderot’s remarks concern Hubert Robert’s paintings. On Carle Vernet’s work, Diderot writes, “If there is a God, his being must be like this, taking pleasure in himself.”


critics who used their influence over a substantial readership to gain careers in government or private arts administration.\textsuperscript{57}

When press restrictions were eased in 1881, Fénéon’s post-Commune generation could be career \textit{littérateurs} with partisan journals and reviews becoming cheaper to produce and easier to publish. No longer needing to gain a mass audience or lay the groundwork for gaining a steady job, these critics crafted their own identity and were attracted to art from those artists working outside academic conventions. These conditions were crucial in producing Neo-Impressionism.\textsuperscript{58} This proliferation of periodicals came at the perfect time for Fénéon’s arrival in Paris. Along with his government job, he became an editor-reviewer for several Symbolist publications.

Arthur Rimbaud, Laforgue and Paul Verlaine were leading Symbolists reacting against Realists like Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert that they associated with the Second Empire. The Franco-Greek poet Jean Moréas wrote the \textit{Symbolist Manifesto} in 1886 but Symbolists tended to disagree on precise interpretations of definitions. Stéphane Mallarmé wrote the Symbolist needs “a mind open to multiple comprehension.” Ambiguity, paradox, the oblique, the allusive were characteristics of Symbolist writing.\textsuperscript{59} This style appealed to Fénéon knowing his contradictory lifestyle and love of irony. Edgar Allen Poe and Goethe were popular among Symbolists. Responding to a tongue-in-cheek call for a Symbolist glossary, Fénéon collaborated with Moréas, Kahn and Adam to compile this glossary that was subsequently attacked.

\textsuperscript{57} Martha Ward. \textit{Neo-Impressionism and the Spaces of the Avant Garde}. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1996. 50.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 51.

for corrupting the French language.\textsuperscript{60} Some Symbolists toyed with dissolution in the pessimistic yet liberating concept \textit{La décadence}.\textsuperscript{61} The Dècadence movement was often interchangeably identified with Symbolism and to make matters more confusing Symbolists were accused of being decadent. Baudelaire was a precursor to the movement, writing “beauty is always bizarre’’ and experimental works that explored fantasies, hallucinations manifested in dreams or nightmares in the subconscious.\textsuperscript{62}

Fénéon also edited and wrote anonymous entries in the \textit{Petit Bottin des letters et des arts}, a symbolist journal of criticism that folded in 1886. In this journal Fénéon wrote a complimentary entry on Degas in a compact, clipped style composed of fleeting images; “DEGAS: A thigh, a flower, a chignon, ballerinas convoluted in the flurry of the tutu; the nose of a tippler; race horses and jockeys turning on the green . . . Unerring kinematics . . . The expression of Modernity.”\textsuperscript{63}

Fénéon intermittently wrote art criticism until the first Society of Independent Artists group show in the summer of 1884. A reporter called these 402 artists “the frauds and fops of painting”\textsuperscript{64} rejected by the Salon. In this show Seurat opened the transition from Impressionism to Neo-Impressionism with \textit{Une Baignade, Asnières}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{footnote60} McGuiness, 5-6. \textit{The Petit Glossaire pour servir à l'intelligence des auteurs decadents et symbolistes.}
\bibitem{footnote61} Fowlie, 11. “The mysterious word \textit{décadence} would seem to mean the will of the artist to understand the basic drives of his nature, to explain what Baudelaire called the ‘the inner abyss’ or ‘cemetery’ of the self, and to use the creation of art as a remedy for ‘ennui’ or ‘spleen’, or what might be called by the simpler term ‘pessimism.’” Verlaine opened his poem \textit{Langueur} with “Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence.”
\bibitem{footnote62} Halperin, 58.
\bibitem{footnote64} Ibid, 53. P. de Katow in \textit{Gil Blas}, May 17, 1884.
\end{thebibliography}
(figure A-5). Fénéon did not write about the painting but he later said he knew this work was important in the moment when he first saw it.

Seurat painted working-class men and boys resting on the banks or swimming in the Seine on a mammoth canvas evoking history painting. Asnières was an industrial area north of Paris, part of the expanding banlieue, and Seurat has included the smokestacks of factories in the hazy distance. The figures of the boy sitting on the bank and the boy in the water shouting to the other shore (La Grande Jatte), seem indifferent or vacant to the leisure they should be enjoying. In his analysis, T.J. Clark argued that Seurat addressed the uneasy intersection of nature and industry in public recreation and the oddity of lower classes taking in bourgeois leisure. Seurat still used brushstrokes but with a lighter touch making bright colors produce the effect of hazy summer air. Fénéon missed a full-scale study of La Grande Jatte displayed in December but after seeing Une Baignade he became La Vogue’s full-time art critic.

**Neo-Impressionism’s True Colors:** Une Baignade and the study for La Grande Jatte were previews for the unveiling of Neo-Impressionism in the Eighth Exhibition of Painting, on May 15, 1886, upstairs from the Maison Dorée restaurant on Rue Laffitte. This would be the Impressionists’ final group show for arguments concerning the direction of their movement tore the group apart. Degas and Eugène Manet, who was Berthe Morisot’s husband, threatened to drop out if Dubois-Pillet (a Seurat follower) was

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65 Ibid, 54. Fénéon bought the painting in 1900.

66 Ibid, 54. Interview with John Rewald in 1940. “… the masterpieces which were its logical consequences followed one after the other; but, as much as I delighted in them, the initial spice of surprise was never repeated.”

Morisot had submitted paintings to the show. Fénéon’s defended his anarchist comrade in vain, then Degas insisted “Impressionist” be dropped from the show’s title (Degas made the same demand for the 1879 show). Monet was committed to dealer George Petit’s international show and Renoir was also pursuing larger markets; Sisley, Gustave Callebotte and Paul Cézanne opted out. Impressionism reached an inescapable crisis with Pissarro and Degas pitted against each other defending their own camps of painters. Pissarro’s favorites – his son Lucian, Seurat, Signac, – were fellow anarchists.

To better understand the controversy surrounding this show, it is important to acknowledge political differences between Degas, Fénéon and Pissarro. Pissarro was an anarchist like Fénéon, on the other hand Degas was more conservative aesthetically, socially and politically than most avant-garde artists. Pissarro was the oldest Impressionist (56 at the time of the show) one of the movement’s founders and the only artist to exhibit paintings in all eight group shows. Pissarro initially painted landscapes in the Realist style of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot then turned to Impressionism. He was Jewish and born on St. Thomas of the Danish Virgin Islands to a family of shopkeepers and moved to Paris as a teen-ager in the 1850s. Often living in poverty, Pissarro had been a longtime socialist before adopting anarchism in the 1880s.

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68 Halperin, 75. Degas called Dubois-Pillot one of Seurat’s “workers in petit point.”


71 Ibid, 77. Also Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon. *Signac 1863-1935*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 2001. 300. Camille Pissarro told his son, Lucian, Manet did not want Signac in the show. Both Pissarros, Signac and Seurat were shown in the same room.
Degas’ family had pretentions to nobility, spelling their name “de Gas” in the 1840s. This was erroneous since Degas’ grandfather Pierre Degast was a baker and Edgar spelled his name Degas around 1870.^{72} The Degas family was *grand bourgeois* before going bankrupt and even without his family’s wealth Degas maintained a patrician air. In the 1870s, Degas painted race courses and opera houses where the privileged gathered and when he wasn’t out at cafés with artists, Degas entertained conservative friends from *haut bourgeois* families.^{73} In the 1886 exhibition, Degas sponsored a group of painters who were not brilliant colorists like Monet, Renoir or the Neo-Impressionists. This Café de la Nouvelle-Athènes clique, which included Mary Cassatt, practiced a hybrid Impressionist-Realist style incorporating Degas’ emphasis on drawing.

Fénéon’s exhibition review was published in June then he decided to publish a re-edited version (along with extracts from other reviews) in a 43-page booklet, *Les Impressionnistes en 1886*. His thorough research (with Pissarro’s help) on the dates and artists in earlier Impressionist shows, and his cataloging demonstrates his desire that the book would have historic significance. He copied Diderot’s *Salons* for the book’s format and had one copy printed on expensive pumicif paper stock (selling for 100 francs) while the rest were printed on cheaper St. Omer stock (1.25 francs). Within 18 months all 227 copies were sold.^{74}

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^{72} McMullen, 8-9.


^{74} Halperin, 95.
Fénéon’s review did not begin with the paintings on display, instead he launched into a history of what he called Impressionism’s “heroic period.” Beginning with Manet’s provocative Salon paintings in the 1860s, he praised Monet, Camille Pissarro, Degas and Renoir for turning the “tar-brush painter” Manet into a “luminist.”75 Fénéon immediately privileged light and color over line and subject matter in accordance with the currents in progressive painting at that time. Fénéon explained Impressionism’s crisis; the founding generation are repeating themselves while the next generation are not given credit for producing experimental, advanced painting.76

In his next move, Fénéon compared three artists in the exhibition representing different stages of Impressionism. The first major figure is Degas. For two years Fénéon did not assert strong opinions about Impressionists, but his tone dramatically changed when analyzing Degas’ pastels. In this series, nude women are bathing, drying, waking, combing their hair and dressing in cramped, dingy interiors (figure A-6). J.K. Huysmans, a writer of the Realist school, wrote that Degas critiques the European painting tradition of the female nude with these “plump, pot-bellied and short” women in undignified positions, “. . . by overturning its most consistently respected idol, woman, sullying her by representing her … in the humiliating positions of her most private absolutions.”77

75 Félix Fénéon. “The Impressionists in 1886”, 963. “Les Impressionistes en 1886” was originally published in La Vogue, June 13-20, 1886. Manet liberally used black on his canvases in following Spanish and Dutch portraiture.

76 Ibid, 964. “... M. Degas presents some typical works; Mme. Morisot and MM. Gauguin and Guillaumin represent the sort of Impressionism that we have come to expect from previous exhibitions; while MM. Pissarro, Seurat and Signac have something new to offer.”

Fénéon’s comments on the same paintings incorporated Symbolist imagery; “Women crouching fill the hull of tubs with swollen melon shapes,” “slightly swollen nested cylinders,” “breasts as ripe as Virgoulée pears hang free.” Here Fénéon avoided the issues that Huysmans has brought up to render a somewhat picturesque reading. Joan Ungersma Halperin explained these pears, *virgouleuse*, are especially juicy and full, but beyond the obvious pun Fénéon’s word-choice subconsciously leads to other associations like *virgule, goule, virer, vir* (a comma, a throat, veering, virility). “Degas' nudes have become delectables for the devouring gaze of the viewer who is understood to be male.”

Since these nudes are in motion -- brushing hair, washing skin, scratching and stretching -- Degas’ lines indicated primary movements along with subtle muscular shapes corresponding to secondary movements. Fénéon’s sharp eye detected the difference between motion and posing arguing that a person aware of being observed stiffens causing their movements to lack spontaneity. “. . . M. Degas does not copy from nature; he builds up a collection of sketches of the same subject, from which his work will draw its undeniable veracity . . .” In deducing that “the cruel and knowing observer” has produced composites assembled from multiple studies, Fénéon affirmed the tradition of multiple studies that Seurat and the Neo-Impressionists employed in constructing their paintings.

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78 Halperin, 78.
79 Halperin, 79.
Further on in this review, Fénéon moved to Gauguin a fixture in these exhibitions despite not becoming a serious painter until the late 1870s. Fénéon argued that this artist manipulates close color tones to achieve a “muffled harmony” in his Normandy pastorals, such as *Edge of the Pond* (figure A-7), creating heavy air with russet tones shared by grazing cows, a farmhouse, reflections in the water.\(^{81}\) Fénéon did not believe Gauguin could lead Impressionism into a new direction, however, he commended Gauguin’s ability to recognize colors in contact with other objects, such as a blue hat lying in green grass, “recompose themselves at a distance” creating new colors.

Seurat’s *La Grande Jatte* is the innovation that pushes Impressionism to an unexpected new direction. Fénéon asserted that only Seurat, not the older Impressionists and not Eugène Delacroix, had undertaken the arduous mark-by-mark mixing that achieved optimal luminosity.\(^{82}\) In approaching light and color, traditional painting treated objects separately, Fénéon wrote, while the Impressionists saw objects interacting with each other. This was innovative but inexact; his description of *La Grande Jatte* detailed in a small square of the painting showed the reader how Seurat’s tiny marks more effectively reproduced the many complimentary tones in nature.

The landscape of *La Grande Jatte* with its disconnected figures walking on the grounds and on the shore of the Seine was inspired by Puvis’ landscapes of classical figures and Greek architecture. Seurat attempted to apply the calm and harmony of

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\(^{81}\) Félix Fénéon “Les Impressionistes en 1886” in Seurat ed. Henri Dorra and John Rewald (Paris: S.A.R.L. Les Beaux-Arts, 1959), XIII. “M. Gauguin’s tones are extremely close to one another, giving a muted harmony in his painting. Massive trees spring from rich, luxuriant and humid ground, invading the frame and blocking out the sky. The air is heavy. … The painter constantly contrasts these russet tones of roof and beast with his greens, and echoes them in the water flowing between tree trunks and through the long grass.”

Puvis’ Golden Age to modern life, Meyer Schapiro argued, only using bright, warm colors of a summer day instead of Puvis’ grayer tones.\(^{83}\)

Signac and Pissarro are the members of Seurat’s supporting cast that Fénéon singles out. Signac’s industrial subjects in the *banlieue* such as his *Les Gazomètres à Clichy* (figure A-8) composed with Seurat’s method are especially vivid and luminescent. Signac appeared to be edifying a banal subject – a ramshackle gasworks on the outskirts of Paris – in a large landscape painting. Fénéon acknowledges the credibility Pissarro gives to the new group and states the fine colors that he mixed with brush and palette on older canvases have improved on new canvases applied with systematic color.\(^{84}\)

Fénéon wrote little or nothing about subject matter in any of these paintings, devoting his remarks to touting the exactitude and innovation of the Neo-Impressionists scientific techniques in contrast to the Impressionists’ arbitrary slapping of color.\(^{85}\) Signac further pushed this argument in his own writings claiming Neo-Impressionism recovered Delacroix’s “systematic application of the laws governing color” after Impressionists muddied the waters.\(^{86}\)

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\(^{83}\) Meyer Schapiro, “Seurat (1958)” in *Modern Art 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers*. (New York: George Braziller, 1979), 105-106. Schapiro also claims that Seurat’s bathers draws from Puvis’ *Doux Pays* and Seurat’s *Poseuses* is influenced by Puvis’ *Jeunes Filles au Bord de la Mer*.

\(^{84}\) Fénéon, “Les impressionists en 1886”, 966.

\(^{85}\) Félix Fénéon “Les Impressionistes en 1886” in *Seurat*, XII. “MM. Georges Seurat, Camille et Lucien Pissarro, Dubois-Pillet and Paul Signac eux, divisent le ton d’une manière consciente et scientifique.”

CHAPTER 4
QUESTIONING THE CRITIC

Shedding light on color: In the Neo-Impressionist booklet, Fénéon used American physicist Ogden N. Rood’s equations to explain how the viewer reconstitutes unmixed, anti-gestural dots, dashes and marks into scientifically exact colors. “These colors, isolated on the canvas, are recomposed on the retina: this gives not a mixture of colors as material (pigments), but a mixture of colors of light.” He did not offer any verifiable evidence supporting Rood’s theories or Seurat’s successful application of such theories, so the reader must trust the critic’s interpretation of Rood’s theories. The accuracy of scientifically-derived color is the backbone of Fénéon’s case for Neo-Impressionism. As this account has been questioned, research has produced evidence that Seurat did not use Rood’s equations or any other color theories.

It was believed that Seurat adopted chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul’s theories, however a comprehensive analysis indicates Seurat’s mark-making did not follow Chevreul. Seurat spent two years working on the painting (including three preparatory canvases), and Seurat would have discovered the difficulty of optically mixing contrasting hues into complimentary colors. Varying dots create texture, not color composition, John Gage argued, as Seurat may simply have liked the visual effect or had other motivations. “... the dotting has itself an important aesthetic, and even a political resonance, in that it draws attention to its own mode of operation, and makes itself accessible to every spectator.”

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88 John Gage, “The Technique of Seurat: A Reappraisal” in The Art Bulletin (Vol. 69, No. 3, Sept. 1987), 452. Seurat may have followed Charles Fourier’s writings on harmonious, communal societies. Seurat writes, “Art is Harmony. Harmony is the analogy of Opposites, the analogy of things similar in tone, in tint,
It was also believed that Fénéon first spoke to Seurat at the group show standing in front of *La Grande Jatte*. It is more likely they met at least a year earlier in a much different setting. Fénéon, along with Seurat, Signac and Dubois-Pillet regularly attended political meetings hosted by an old Communard, Robert Caze. After seeing *La Grande Jatte*, Fénéon wrote Seurat letters asking him to explain his unprecedented technique. The aloof, reclusive Seurat did not reply. Several letters from June 1886-April 1887 indicate Pissarro -- not Seurat -- led Fénéon to Rood. Fénéon borrowed Dubois-Pillet’s copy of Rood’s book (*Modern Chromatics*) then paraphrased sections that could apply to the painting.

Seurat’s Divisionism was so shocking in its day that the artist’s treatment of urban Parisians and the implications of the work’s day and place were often ignored. Seurat painted a Sunday, the only legally-recognized day off for all citizens after decades of political battles between workers and bourgeois legislators. It was the only day that Seurat could place all classes together at a public recreation area in their *endimanchés* (Sunday best). Top-hat wearing workers are indistinguishable from professionals much like Fénéon’s dandyish clothing leveled class distinctions. Un-chaperoned women scattered about, some fishing, walking, reading, others simply sitting on the grass, and

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89 Gage, 73. Meetings ended after Caze was mortally wounded in a duel, Feb. 15, 1886. Camille Pissarro and Paul Cézanne attended at least one meeting.

90 Paul Smith. *Seurat and the Avant Garde*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP; 1997), 23. “An unpublished letter from Fénéon to Edouard Dujarin and Teodor de Wyzewa (May 20, 1886) shows that he had solicited ‘the Impressionists, Seurat and Signac’ for information by this date…” In Sept. 1886 Camille Pissarro told his son, Lucian, ‘I would have liked him to speak to Seurat, but it is impossible.”

91 Ibid, 23.

92 Boime, 161. The national day of rest movement dates back to 1814.
even the chaperoned women are set apart from their male partner – a wink at feminism in nineteenth-century France. The La Grande Jatte recreation area had been part of the Orleans’ expansive family estate seized by the Second Empire in its urban parkland campaign. This island park exemplifies the republic’s triumph over the ancien régime.

Critics accustomed to Impressionism’s discernable modern settings could not pin down Seurat’s intent. Stephen F. Eisenman argued that the painting’s “odd melding of genres, sources, and points of view suggests a deliberate evasiveness, an intention to occlude critical interpretation.” Like his earlier Bathers, Seurat’s scale in La Grande Jatte harkened back to monumental history paintings. The painting’s scale threatened to overpower its other attributes. After Pissarro praised characteristics in Seurat’s painting, Degas sarcastically replied, “Oh, I would have noted that myself, Pissarro, except that the painting is so large!” The rigid figures reminded one critic of Gothic art.

Another reason why La Grande Jatte attracted so much attention was the eased press restrictions previously mentioned. Fénéon and the new generation of Symbolist critics used painting to establish editorial identities matching their publications and they wanted to break away from Realism and Impressionism.

93 Ibid, 165. “Nothing in the actual relations of the park crowd suggests prostitution … If anything Seurat has de-eroticized the afternoon encounter in the park to stress the self-enclosed character of each figural activity.”

94 Ibid, 146.

95 Eisenman, 216.

96 Halperin, 83. Taken from March, 1886 letter from Camille Pissarro to Lucian Pissarro.


98 Ward, 50. “… Paul Adam in the symbolist La Revue contemporaine, Jules Christophe in the arts newsletter Journal des artistes, Jean Ajalbert in the socialist La Revue moderne, and Felix Feneon in one of the most high-flying and short-lived of the symbolist petites revues, La Vogue.”
The anarchist Fénéon and his new breed in the radical press could identify with raising art over commerce and opposing bourgeois tastes.\(^9\) The old guard’s derision against *La Grande Jatte* could have been less about the painting and more about taking down these upstart critics and their reinterpretation of Impressionism.

The positivist writer Émile Hennequin praised the Neo-Impressionists’ artistic ability but warned of the danger of over-emphasizing scientific color theory. He preferred Seurat’s grey seascape *Grandcamp, Un Soir* (figure A-9) painted in 1885. As for *La Grande Jatte*, Hennequin calls scientific color “an artifice.” Optical composition appears to have failed, besides, Seurat wastes time chasing hues that human beings cannot see. “. . . just as in a meadow we do not discern the different greens of the various types of grass.”\(^10\) Huysmans suspected Seurat has created a gimmick cloaking little substance. “Strip his figures of the colored fleas with which they are covered, and underneath there is nothing; no soul, no thought, nothing.”\(^11\)

Newer critics recognizing class consciousness on parade in *La Grande Jatte*, incorporated the figures’ poses, occupations, and attitudes into reviews praising Seurat’s luminous colors. Maids, clerks and soldiers are all “lead soldiers” marching on

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\(^9\) Ibid, 53. “Durand-Ruel’s decision in mid to late 1886, not to exhibit neo-impressionist canvases strengthened the specificity of the identification: this was an art that had not capitulated to the market that dealers seemed now to control.”

\(^10\) Émile Hennequin. “Notes on Art: The Exhibition of Independent Artists” in *Seurat in Perspective*, ed. Norma Broude (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 42. “Notes d’Art: Exposition des artistes indépendents,” *La Vie moderne*, Sept. 11, 1886. “The talent of M. Seurat and his followers is not in question, but it is impossible to over-emphasize that one technique more or less can contribute little to art...” and “His method then ... is an artifice, and in these terms it is proper to judge it only on the basis of its ability to render nature more truly than others have done.”

regimented squares\(^{102}\); stiff figures wearing cheap clothes preoccupied with artificial poses are modernity’s banal products, “British cant imitated everywhere.”\(^{103}\) Fénéon’s colleague Jules Christophe wrote that Seurat, “tries to seize the diverse attitudes of age, sex, and social class: elegant men and elegant ladies, soldiers, wetnurses, bourgeois, workers, it is a brave effort.”\(^{104}\)

They agreed scientifically-derived color was far more accurate than what Adam called the despised trick of mixing and blending that older Impressionists employed. Color wise, Degas’ well-drawn pastels underwhelmed Adam (“bituminous tones”), however the “revolutionary” Seurat’s calculations yield depth, honesty, subtle chromatic relationships; “Everything appears clear, precise, without any mists where the difficult points could have been hidden,” Adam wrote, “Silk roses on the dress of a baby, next to the woollen roses on the dress of a mother; a world of differences masterfully noted.”\(^{105}\)

Politics of Painting: Fénéon’s preoccupation with science, the erasure of line, the prefix “neo”, and art’s autonomy infuses radical politics into his criticism. Halperin argued that *La Grande Jatte* employs “the language of science as a crystal” that a

\(^{102}\) Eisenman, 216. Alfred Paulet: “The painter has given his figures the automatic gestures of lead soldiers, moving about on regimented squares. Maids, clerks, and soldiers all move around with a similar, slow, banal, identical step . . .”

\(^{103}\) Ibid, 216. Paul Adam: “Everything appears clear and clean … and even the stiffness of the figures and their punched-out forms contribute to the note of modernity, reminding us of our badly cut clothes which cling to our bodies and our reserved gestures, British cant imitated everywhere . . .”

\(^{104}\) Boime, 144. “M. Georges Seurat, finally, with the temperament of a Calvinist martyr, who has planted. With the faith of a Jan Hus, fifty people, lifesize, on the bank of the Seine at La Grande Jatte, one Sunday in the year 1884 and tries to seize the diverse attitudes of age, sex, and social class . . .”

progressive reader could look through to see the painting. On the surface, Fénéon’s explication of Seurat’s “color science” does not seem subversive or overtly anarchist, but science divided 19th-century intellectuals. Anarchists and progressives linked scientific inquiry to rationality that could unleash humankind’s constructive potential. Conservatives rejected science they claimed destroyed French identity and tradition. Anarchists were attracted to La Grande Jatte’s scientific look along with the social critique they read in the work.

The petit point eliminates the gestural mark as carrier of genius and potentially opens painting to all artists. Untrained artists have as much authority as a trained artist applying brushstrokes. Gesture was hotly debated throughout the century: Neoclassicists subdued gesture while the Romantics heightened it. Although Manet’s paintings were gestural, John House found a uniform tache (patch of color) to achieve flattening effects. In House’s view, Monet’s free gesture in late Impressionism revived Romantic flamboyance rebuking the tache on paintings like John Singer Sargent’s Madame X. Fénéon disliked virtuosity for virtuosity’s sake, for example his argument that Monet had a propensity for basically showing off.

106 Ibid, 82. “The dandy in him, adept at masking intimate reality and cognizant of Seurat’s own need to keep his art aloof, used the language of science as a crystal to clarify the view of the ‘happy view’ and to deflect the derision of the vulgar herd.”

107 Hutton, 19.

108 Smith, 1.

109 John House. “Reading the Grande Jatte” in Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies (Vol. 14, No. 2, 1989), 130. “The Neo-Impressionist petit point, or dot, as it evolved in 1885-86 during the execution of the Grande Jatte, was corrective, a new, impersonal technique opposed to the romantic individualism of Manet’s legacy and of later Impressionism.”

110 Clark, 67. “Une propension à faire grimacer la nature pour bien prouver que la minute était unique et qu’on ne la reverrait jamais plus.”
Divisionism’s mechanical look removes the artist’s distinctive and self-referential “handwriting” and the presence of a human creator. Seurat’s utopian erasure of the creative genius removed the barrier between subject and object resulting in a democratized situation. Fénéon wanted the viewer’s active, learned eye to become the author composing the decomposed, authorless painting.

In most of the academic painting that the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists reacted against valued line or drawing skill and de-emphasized color. Line vs. color had always been an ideological debate, for instance 19th-century supporters of line sited the Baroque classicist Nicolas Poussin expressing Platonic ideals that bolstered history painting’s edifying purposes and reinforced supposed French links to Latin antiquity.

The centuries-long debate pitting the Poussinists vs. exuberant colorists like Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens was typified in classicist J.A.D. Ingres’ advice to his students, “Drawing is the probity of art . . . when passing Rubens, put on horse-blinders.” Delacroix painted swirling, vivid colors that inspired Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists yet the Romantic still needed line to solidify figures. Seurat’s colored dots ended this debate, Clark argued, by achieving a “light-dark continuum” where

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112 Félix Fénéon “Les Impressionistes en 1886” in Seurat XIII. “Ici, en effet, la patte est inutile, le truquage impossible; nulle place pour les morceaux de bravoure; que la main soit gourde, mais que l’œil soit agile, perspicace et savant; sur une autruche, une botte de paille, une vague ou un roc la manoeuvre du pinceau reste la même.”

113 Mary Thompkins Lewis. “The Critical History of Impressionism” in Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post Impressionism, ed. Mary Tompkins Lewis (Berkeley, Calif.: California UP, 2007), 3. “The painting of Nicolas Poussin, the father of French Baroque Classicism in seventeenth-century Rome, was widely promoted in this era by French Nationalists anxious to substantiate their country’s ancient Mediterranean roots.”

114 McMillen, 34.
bodies are dissolved by light but tones give light substance. Clark compared Seurat’s dot to an exploding bomb blasting all bourgeois conceptions to “Art-ness” to smithereens.

Fénéon initially called this new group “the avant-garde of impressionism” then renamed Seurat and his associates, “les néo-impressionistes.” Attaching the “néo” prefix is a complicated move that preserves the Impressionist origin and also demonstrates a break from the older generation. Many old schools or movements were revived or reinterpreted in this century ( “néo-classique”, “néo-grec”, “néo-celtique,” “néo-critique”) necessitating this prefix.

Martha Ward explained “néo” complications: “Fénéon’s disruptive strategy of simultaneously historicizing, superseding, and reviving impressionism was close to what Fredric Jameson has called, in another context, a ‘lexical non-event.’” With the “Neo” prefix, Fénéon preserved this movement in art history, though keeping his options open that newer artists could reform Impressionism.

**Writing Neo-Impressionism:** Fénéon became the Neo-Impressionists’ chronicler-spokesman covering several of the group’s shows. In these reviews Fénéon refined earlier claims then aggravates stylistic rifts between Impressionism’s generations. His 1886 review of the Tuileries exhibition introduces “la méthode néo-impressionniste” (not

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115 Stephen F. Eisenman. “Mass Culture and Utopia: Seurat and Neoimpressionism” in *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, ed. Stephen F. Eisenman (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002), 320. “Since before the Renaissance, the art of drawing was based upon the control and manipulation of line: contour, movement, direction, volume, light and expression were all judged dependent on it.”

116 T.J. Clark. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale U.P, 1999), 108. “The dot exploded the opposition. And this was wonderful. It planted a bomb in the middle of the bourgeois idea of freedom – and order, and individuality, and art-ness, and taste, and touch, intuition, variety, expressiveness.”

117 Ward, 58.
yet calling them Neo-Impressionists), and builds up Pissarro (who was not in the show) into the master guiding Impressionism’s progressive school.\textsuperscript{118}

A leftist journal published in southern France (\textit{L’Emancipation sociale}) asked Fénéon to write a comprehensive report on the group’s next major show at a pavilion left over from the 1878 Universal Exposition. In this 1887 article, Fénéon taught the remote South about the Parisian avant-garde by sketching two casts of characters. Signac is “alert and voluble,” Dubois-Pillet wears a cravat and a monocle, Lucian Pissarro is an Indian Sudra, Seurat has “the austere features of a sixteenth-century Calvinist.”\textsuperscript{119} He contrasts these colorful individuals against Degas’ bland crew: “. . . Thus it is wrong to include under the label of Impressionism painters like M. Degas, M. (Jean-Louis) Forain, M. (Jean-François) Raffaëlli who are interested particularly in movement, anecdote and character.”\textsuperscript{120} Camille Pissarro said these remarks were too aggressive.\textsuperscript{121} Fénéon was just warming up.

Pissarro privately expressed his frustration with Impressionism at a show featuring old colleagues Monet, Renoir and Sisley: “I had all I could stand from that confounded exhibition which smells to heaven of bourgeois values.”\textsuperscript{122} Giving up all hope that Impressionism could be reformed or its camps reconciled, Fénéon irrecoverably drew


\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 99.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 100.

the dividing line in his next major article. Fénéon uses the term “néo-impressionnistes” for the first time separating Pissarro, Seurat, Signac and Dubois-Pillet from the Degas pack.\textsuperscript{123}

Fénéon claimed Neo-Impressionism’s stylistic tendencies were “latent in (J.M.W.) Turner and Delacroix” then systematized by Monet, Manet, Renoir, Pissarro and others (he omitted Degas). Degas’ Realists-Impressionists do not belong with Monet or Pissarro because they are not “luministes.”\textsuperscript{124} The public, “accustomed to the pitch-black sauces” of mainstream easel painting rejected the early Impressionists’ brilliant luminosity and color.

Fénéon’s account is based on effectively applying color and light and rejecting narrative. Using this standard, Fénéon claimed Seurat’s Divisionism brought “rigorous” techniques to Impressionism.\textsuperscript{125} After refining his old color theory, Fénéon stated the Neo-Impressionists sought to synthesize nature with sensation, also eliminating the artist’s hand so that the viewer can look straight into the painting.\textsuperscript{126} Free from the “mechanical copiers,” Fénéon’s anarchist-artists created “higher, sublimated reality which becomes infused with their personalities.”\textsuperscript{127} Since La Grande Jatte was first

\textsuperscript{123} Félix Fénéon. “Le néo-impressionnisme” in Seurat, XX. Originally published in L’Art Moderne, May. 1887.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, XVIII.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, XVIII. “Cette technique rigoureuse, l’Impressionnisme la possède depuis 1884-1885. M. Georges Seurat en fut l’instaurateur.”

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid, XX. “... l’œil n’est plus sollicité que par ce qui est essentiellement la peinture.”

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, XX. “Parmi, la cohue des machinaux copistes des extérieurs, ils imposent, ces quarte ou cinq artistes la sensation même de la vie: c’est que la réalité objective leur est simple theme à la creation d’une réalité supérieure et sublime où leur personnalité se transfuse.”
hung, skeptics complained that science had overtaken the artists’ talent in an easily-imitated method.

In an 1888 article, Fénéon obliquely takes the blame due to his over-emphasizing the science in painting. Fénéon waffled on the importance of color theories that evidence suggests were falsified in the first place. “... it would be wrong to imagine these painters manipulating color wheels (generally inaccurate) and consulting the reports of physicists (not very revealing) about the way complimentary colors really lust after each other.”

Neo-Impressionists applauded Fénéon’s criticism. Signac unabashedly declared, “only the infallible F. Fénéon gave a pertinent analysis of (Seurat’s) technical achievement.” Fellow Symbolist Adam wrote Fénéon “discovered scientific criticism of painting.” Pissarro wrote, “I am happy you did justice by Seurat.”

In a letter to Signac, Seurat wrote, “I still regard Fénéon’s pamphlet as the exposition of my ideas on painting.”

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129 Ibid, 85.

130 Smith, 25.

131 Ibid, 23.
CHAPTER 5
FRIENDS BECOME FOES

This thesis has already investigated the complex persona Fénéon crafted that intrigued the Parisian intelligentsia. Cautious, ironic, sarcastic: the cool “F.F.” maintained his defenses among friends and foes. Seurat, Signac, Camille and Lucian Pissarro, Dubois-Pillet, Luce, Charles Angrand and Henri-Edmond Cross consistently received Fénéon’s compliments. Other painters in the movement were disregarded or ignored. All of these favorites were active anarchists forming the core of the Society of Independent Artists. When the man behind that mask felt an artist had betrayed his politics Fénéon wrote a negative review or none at all.

This section will reveal patterns showing the critic’s judgments were compromised whenever he doubted an artist’s commitment to anarchism. The political motivations behind Fénéon’s relationships with artists on both sides of Impressionism will also be presented.

First-hand accounts stated Seurat was an insecure, remote bourgeois capable of little conversation outside art. Signac befriended Seurat after seeing Une Baignade, Asnières then exposed him to people and ideas outside bourgeois convention. They were an odd couple: Signac was gregarious, ebullient, fully committed to anarchism, with a violent temper.

\[132\] Smith, 122.

\[133\] Ferretti-Bocquillon, 41. The organization formed in 1884. Dubois-Pillet was vice president until his death in 1890. Signac was president from 1909-34.

Anarchist loyalties were tested when the Third Republic suspended journalist Paul Alexis’ attempt to launch a stage production of Zola’s *Germinal* at the Theatre du Chatelet. France suffered through an economic crisis from 1883-87 and lower wages with harsher working conditions sparked wildcat strikes. Zola’s novel is based on miners in northern France holding a 56-day strike in 1885.  

The socialist newspaper *Cri du Peuple* published a serialized version of *Germinal* then Alexis (Zola’s biographer) had a contentious meeting with the Minister of Fine Arts. The stage play might have faded away if not for a miners’ strike breaking out in January, 1886. Alexis launched a subscription fund for the miners’ families since he had currency in Paris’ radical underground he expected these insurgents to contribute. Signac made two donations then Pissarro gave two francs anonymously.  

There is scant evidence that Seurat made a donation even though he received 400 francs a month from his father. Was Seurat indifferent or apolitical? Clark put it simply: “Seurat was an ironist.” *La Grande Jatte* did not represent any obvious political ideology, although the mixing of classes in a public place could be seen as utopian. This painting is ironic, Eisenman argued, and it successfully expressed Neo-Impressionist politics; “For it is precisely the rejection of convention, the ironizing of all

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135 Halperin, 56.  
136 Smith, 78.  
137 Ibid, 78-79.  
138 Ibid, 79. Seurat may have contributed 20 centimes under the name “Legrand.”  
139 Clark, 129. “But what the dot ironized was as much the idealist’s belief in an irreducible mere moment of signing as the materialist’s dream of sensation recapitulated as it happens.”
organized political systems, and the celebration of personal autonomy that characterizes much fin-de-siecle anarchism.”

Many avant-garde artists were more interested in expanding art and society’s boundaries then engaging in radical politics. Seurat did not feel loyalty to one ideology, freely mixing with anarchists, symbolists, socialists, and nationalists. Paul Smith disputed Seurat’s understanding of anarchism, claiming Seurat’s “anarchism” was based on Signac’s anarchist readings of Seurat’s paintings. In Smith’s view, “Seurat was a poseur.” He would go slumming in the daytime then wear a frock coat for evening dinner with his mother.

Fénéon never mentioned Seurat’s lack of support for the miners (he believed Seurat was an anarchist), nevertheless Fénéon countered with silence toward the artist’s later paintings. His timing is too close to be coincidental and the paintings are important works in Seurat’s oeuvre. Fénéon did not write about La Chahut (1890) or the portrait of Seurat’s mistress Madeleine Knobloch, Jeune Femme se Poudrant (1890), and he barely mentioned La Parade (1888) or Seurat’s final painting Le Cirque (1891) (figure A-16).

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140 Eisenman, 216-217. “At once contemporary and timeless, epic and ironic, visionary and realist, the Grande Jatte advances no specific political or aesthetic doctrines. … The Grande Jatte assumes an ironic position toward its subject; while such a stance advances no specific politics, it would nevertheless be wrong to consider Seurat and his art apolitical.”

141 Ibid, 65.

142 Ibid, 97. Signac’s remarks were published in La Révolte in 1981 after Seurat’s death.

143 Ibid, 79.

144 Halperin, 88. “He did not air his opinions. But in that time when it was not yet stylish for young people to be fed up with everything, his literary and artistic friends and those who supported his work in the press belongs to anarchist circles; and if Seurat’s opinions differed radically from theirs … the fact would have been noticed.”
His ignoring *Le Cirque* is surprising considering that Fénéon called circuses “a place of truth.” In an 1888 article “Circuses, Theaters, Politics”, Fénéon wanted this spectacle to have the same luminescence and vivid color that he saw in Neo-Impressionist paintings.\(^{145}\) Seurat’s *Le Cirque* features a female dancer balancing herself on top of a running horse with a twisting acrobat behind them. In the foreground a clown has opened the curtain bringing the viewer into the scene. In contrast to the action in the ring, the circus audience sits passively in stiff poses watching the performers but with their hands in their laps instead of clapping. In his examination of Seurat’s later paintings, Schapiro observed that Seurat’s figures became caricatures expressing exaggerated emotions in grotesque expressions. “They have no inner life, they are mannequins capable of only three expressions – sadness, gaiety and neutral calm . . . ”\(^{146}\)

The last major Seurat painting Fénéon reviewed was *Les Poseuses* (figure A-10) shown with *La Parade*. Of this large painting of three nude women standing and sitting in front of *La Grande Jatte*, Fénéon wrote, “… this work puts to shame any memory of nudies in galleries and legends.”\(^ {147}\) A year later Fénéon expressed disappointment in Seurat’s seascapes; “The conchoid clouds of *Le Crotoy* are not very convincing . . . ”\(^ {148}\)

Pissarro turned his back on Seurat in 1888 just before returning to Impressionism. In a letter to Signac, he wrote that Seurat’s academic training coupled with his overtly scientific style could ruin the cause of progressive painting. “Seurat is of

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\(^{146}\) Schapiro, 108. Schapiro also found that Seurat’s figures in the painting were taken from circus posters.

\(^{147}\) Ibid, 130.

\(^{148}\) Ibid, 131.
the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he is steeped in it … So apply the science that belongs to everyone, but keep for yourself the gift you have of feeling as an artist of a free race . . .”

As differences between Seurat and Fénéon intensified, Signac and the critic strengthened their friendship. Fénéon expanded his campaign in 1890 by organized a series of artist monographs in the literary magazine *Les Hommes d’aujourd’hui*. Pissarro, Seurat, Signac, Luce, Dubois-Pillet, Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh and Gauguin would receive treatments from writers familiar with the movement edited by Fénéon. Keeping this rift in mind, it is no surprise that Fénéon assigned himself Signac after giving Christophe the Seurat monograph.¹⁵⁰ Fénéon allowed Signac to approve drafts before publication then the finished version was the fourth monograph in the series. Fénéon unreservedly praised Signac’s painting style creating the impression that Signac was the new leader of the group.¹⁵¹

Seurat was furious because Fénéon did not publically acknowledge that Seurat started the movement, on the contrary, other monographs downplayed Seurat’s importance. In an emotional letter to Fénéon, Seurat wrote, “… Then you brought me out of eclipse, with Signac, who benefited from my research.”¹⁵²

Fénéon’s backing Signac was not without merit. Seurat was a deeply private man who never explained his techniques in published writing. Signac would become a

¹⁴⁹ Smith, 157.
¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 131.
¹⁵¹ Halperin, *Félix Fénéon and the Language of Art Criticism*, 34. Exemplaires specimens d’un art à grand développement decorative, qui sacrifie l’anecdote à l’arabesque, la nomenclature à la synthese, le fugace au permanent, et dans les fêtes et les prestiges, confère a la nature, que lassait à fin sa réalité précaire, une authentique réalité.”
¹⁵² Halperin, Felix Feneon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siecle Paris, 139.
significant theorist, beginning with “Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism” (1899) which clearly presented the Neo-Impressionists’ objectives. Signac wrote letters and published articles in accord with Fénéon’s emphasis on overall composition. Signac, like the other Neo-Impressionists, attempted to achieve harmony without giving too much weight to subject matter. “The subject is nothing, or at least only part of a work of art, no more important than other elements; color, line, composition . . . ”

Signac believed that a society based on anarcho-communism would allow the working class to recognize this harmony, “. . . when the worker is free of stupefying exploiters, when the worker has the time to think and educate himself, he will appreciate all the different qualities of a work of art.”

Pissarro could have been the group’s elder statesman but he recognized Signac’s youth and leadership qualities. “The entire ‘neo’ burden rests on your shoulders. Seurat will not be attacked because he keeps quiet. I am distained as an old codger”

Fénéon’s monograph, Seurat’s early death and Signac’s lucid writings on Neo-Impressionist theory caused one scholar to call Signac the “Saint Paul of Neo-Impressionism.”

The rift between Fénéon and Seurat tragically ended when Seurat suddenly died of diphtheria on Easter Sunday, 1891. Fénéon’s obituary is shockingly as clinical as a catalog entry. “Died March 29, aged thirty-one, Seurat: he exhibited at the ‘Salon’ in 1883 . . . ” Fénéon lists Seurat’s shows, his amount of canvases, drawings, panels,

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153 Signac: Portrait of Signac, 47.
154 Signac: Portrait of Signac, 47.
155 Ibid, 38.
156 Ferretti-Bocquillon, 107. Thadée Natanson.
sketchbooks with only one vaguely personal remark "... and doubtless many a masterpiece.""¹⁵⁷

Fénéon, Signac and Pissarro appear to have conspired against Gauguin in 1891 after Gauguin sold a series of paintings for 9,000 francs at a public auction.¹⁵⁸ The feud between Gauguin and Signac began when the older Gauguin threw the 16-year old Signac out of the 1880 Impressionist exhibition when the boy was sketching a Degas painting. “One does not copy here,” Gauguin said.¹⁵⁹ Their feud was intensified over confusion concerning the use of Signac’s vacated studio.¹⁶⁰ After this incident the hot-tempered Gauguin branded Signac and all of Seurat’s followers as his enemies.

Fénéon accused Gauguin of stealing Émile Bernard’s visual style after Gauguin lived with the artist in Brittany. Gauguin began painting Christ imagery in the late 1880s, a move Fénéon found self-aggrandizing and pandering to bourgeois tastes. Gauguin’s skill at pottery and sculpture, earning Fénéon’s praise in earlier years, now has drastically declined.¹⁶¹ The three anarchists saw Gauguin as just another profiteer manipulating a market. “Gauguin is not a seer,” Pissarro wrote, “he is a schemer who has sensed that the bourgeoisie are moving to the right...”¹⁶² In a letter to Fénéon,

¹⁵⁸ Halperin, 218.
¹⁵⁹ Ferretti-Bocquillon, 84.
¹⁶⁰ Halperin, 88. Signac allowed Gauguin to use the studio but Seurat got there first with a key. Not knowing about this arrangement Seurat instructed the concierge not to let anyone in.
¹⁶¹ Ibid, 220.
¹⁶² Varías, 133.
Signac composed a mock slogan: “Be in Love; Be Mysterious; Be Symbolist; Be Boulangist; Be always well dressed; Be Grenadine: Trust old Gauguin!”

Fénéon’s review of the 1886 exhibition contained sections revealing favoritism or at least sloppiness. Artists found it curious to see undue space given to an unknown Swiss artist, David Estoppey, who was not listed in the catalogue. Objections were raised over Dubois-Pillet being mentioned along with Seurat, the two Pissarros and Signac when he did not submit works. The critic was caught abusing his power; Fénéon admitted Estoppey was going to paint his portrait but he was unapologetic about adding Dubois-Pillet. Degas angrily called Dubois-Pillet “du bois pilé” and Gauguin was incensed over this attempt to raise this artist to the avant-garde.

To reciprocate for his monograph, Signac wanted to paint a life-size portrait of Fénéon mixing color theory, symbolism, Japanese design, with the duo’s ironic humor. In his response, Fénéon jokingly proposed the title “Portrait of an Unknown Young Man” along with the question, “Do you already have an idea for the pose, dress and décor? And can I keep the monocle that you have not yet seen in my right eye?” (Fénéon never wore a monocle). As Fénéon maintained his self-deprecating cool; Signac seriously approached painting the definitive Neo-Impressionist work.

In the finished portrait, Fénéon stands in profile in a yellow coat, carrying his top hat and walking stick, looking to the left offering a white flower. In avant-garde circles Fénéon would be easily recognized by his goatee and strong facial features.

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163 Halperin, 222. “Be in Love; Be Mysterious; Be Symbolist; Be Boulangist; Be always well dressed; Be Grenadine: Trust old Gauguin.”

164 Ibid, 86, 87. After being provoked by Gauguin, Armand Guillaumin confronted Seurat, “Dubois-Pillet is no more in the avant-garde than you and Signac.”

165 Ibid, 161.
Behind the figure is a pinwheel of colors, waves, shapes, decorations swirling within bands that join at a central vanishing point. Signac titled the work *Sur l’email d’un fond rhythmique de measures et d’angles, de tons et de teintes, portrait de M. Félix Fénéon en 1890, Opus 217* (figure A-11). Signac continued utilizing divisionism along with embracing color and line from the writings of scientist Charles Henry (Fénéon rejected Henry: “we are in a studio, not a laboratory”\(^{166}\)), yet the protracted title spoofs such tracts and the painting’s composition exaggerated Henry’s visual concepts. Perhaps in homage to the green carnation Oscar Wilde carried around Paris, the white flower Fénéon holds is a cyclamen coming from the Greek word for circle spoofing Henry’s *cercle chromatique*.\(^{167}\) Signac captured Fénéon’s deadpan humor rendering him rigid against the dynamic backdrop. Showing Fénéon in profile is a private jab at Seurat who had drawn Signac in profile as a stuffy bourgeois in top hat, walking stick and cape for the *Les Hommes d’aujourd’hui* cover featuring Signac’s monograph (figure A-12).\(^{168}\)

Critics at the Salon of Independents (spring 1891) responded with indifference or confusion at the work; one said it was “cold and dry” others objected to the overblown title and/or the kaleidoscopic background overwhelming the figure.\(^{169}\)

**The Proletarian Painter:** Fénéon worked with bureaucrats and socialized with the intelligentsia, all the while maintaining contact with workers whose plight deeply affected him since childhood. The earnest idealist inside the ironist came out in Fénéon’s friendship with Neo-Impressionism’s authentic working man Maximilien Luce. The

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\(^{166}\) Ibid, 160.

\(^{167}\) Ibid, 146.

\(^{168}\) Ferretti-Bocquillon, 162.

\(^{169}\) Ibid, 162.
proletarian drank *vin ordinare*, read *La revolte*, wore a battered hat and shabby clothes as he dined often in Fénéon’s apartment. He was a wood engraver and a devoted anarchist who, like others of his generation, witnessed a mass execution of Communards as a child.

Luce joined Fénéon’s favorites after submitting paintings to the 1887 Society of Independent Artists exhibition. In an early review, Fénéon described Luce as, “A newcomer, a tough, loyal fellow with a primitive, muscular talent.” Many of Luce’s early paintings depicted the downtrodden Parisians that Fénéon and other anarchists supported but without the “symphonic charm” of Seurat’s and Signac’s luminous colors. Luce’s *Terrain à Montmartre, Rue Championnet* (figure A-13) is not far off from the Realism that the Neo-Impressionists had previously rejected. Considering the factories and slagheaps Luce painted, Fénéon excused Luce for not using color and light as effectively as his peers, “. . . he doesn’t need bombast to stamp such spectacles with his own originality . . . No literary effect falsifies the very real emotion that they arouse.” Luce also produced propaganda images for periodicals and newspapers that caught the government’s attention; he also was a defendant in the *Procès de Trente* who, like Fénéon, was also acquitted.

There is a potent political and economic context in Luce’s industrial view of Montmartre or his *L’Homme à sa toilette* (figure A-14). Montmartre had been the Communards stronghold, more than a decade later Luce’s landscape features a factory tower pouring black smoke that hangs above gray buildings. Luce has a deep social

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170 Ibid, 112.
171 Ibid, 112.
172 Ibid, 115.
consciousness, however, Fénéon’s strident de-emphasizing of subject ignored the encroachment of industry on the suburbs. On this painting he wrote; “. . . a great ray of sunlight falls obliquely through piles of polychrome clouds and covers the distances of the city with a fine powder of light.” 173 Fénéon acknowledged Luce’s subjects in a general way, “He chooses to paint scenes of the dilapidated areas around the fortifications on the outskirts of Paris.” 174

Drab housing, factory smokestacks and industrial decay in Luce, Signac’s Les Gazomètres à Clichy and Seurat’s Banlieue redefine landscape painting. Fénéon’s writing never speculates on such intensions. Radicals, progressives and the left-wing press defended Signac, Luce and other Neo-Impressionists for depicting la vie moderne through these industrial subjects. 175

As Luce, Signac and others produced factory or despoiled suburban scenes, Seurat released important works La Chahut, La Parade (or Parade de Cirque), La Cirque that Fénéon did not review. These paintings depicted urban, public spectacles that came after Fénéon began pushing Seurat to the background.

**Propaganda by the Word and by the Deed:** He was not silent nor was he apolitical in his political commentaries for Anarchist and Far Left publications. Beginning in 1890, Fénéon gradually shifted away from art and literature reviews towards propagandistic writing in sporadic columns “Facts” and “Agitation” until landing the

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175 Robert L. Herbert, *From Millet to Léger: Essays in Social Art History*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 2002.111. “Seurat’s early attraction to industrial scenes was shared by Signac, Luce, Angrand, Dubois-Pillet, and others. It was in fact the painting of la vie moderne, the cry of progressive critics since Baudelaire, as well as the artistic merits of the Neo-Impressionists that won the admiration of the political radicals among the Symbolist period. . . . The Neo-Impressionists were also frequently defended by the left-wing press even when its writers did not know them personally.”
reoccurring column Hourras, tollés et rires maigres. He was not a political theorist issuing manifestos, Fénéon reviewed books and paintings in the same column space that reported on workers' strikes and anarchist bombings. Since Fénéon was still working in the War Office these columns were unsigned or used pseudonyms close friends would recognize. Progressive art in galleries and exhibitions is one way to advance the anarchist revolution, in these anonymous writings Fénéon told painters another way is "we've got to be slap-dab in the middle of anarcho-civilization" issuing propaganda images that working class can easily understand. 176

In his political articles, Fénéon’s voice changed to the slang speaking “prolo” worker laced with tart humor that is incendiary in more ways than one. “Propaganda by the Deed” became a popular slogan among anarchists promoting bombings, assassinations and other terror tactics that would incite revolution against the Third Republic.177 Fénéon used “propaganda by word” to support subversive activity throughout the world, for example residents of a Japanese village refusing to pay taxes.178 He nudged disgruntled proletarians into doing the same and justified stealing to feed hungry mouths, “. . . let’s quote the gospel of Mark: ‘now it happened that he was passing through the cornfields on the Sabbath, and as the disciples made their way through, they began to pick ears of corn . . .’”.179

176 Ward. 231.
177 The term originated in Paul Brousse’s 1877 article supporting the Benevento uprising in Italy.
178 Halperin, 248. "The Japanese, who have had such a positive influence on our painting, would that they could influence our political ways! Yokohama, 23 May (1892). “
179 Ibid, 248. “‘Let’s be fearless and defy the five years’ hard labor and three-thousand franc fine for incitement to stealing and justification for stealing; let’s quote the gospel of Mark: “now it happened that he was passing through the cornfields on the Sabbath, and as the disciples made their way through, they began to pick ears of corn…”"
The restaurant bombing that is believed to be Fénéon’s handiwork is not the only incident of his “propaganda by the deed”; Taking advantage of his security clearance, Fénéon published passages from War Office reports in his anti-military columns. “The bullets, model 1886, after penetrating through a small cut, come out by tearing flesh over a large expanse, and perforated a stake fifteen centimeters thick. There’s a report to comfort a really patriotic heart!”

Advocating individual action that disrupted the state instead of collective insurrection seemed closer to the anarchist ideal. Pissarro and Signac also contributed columns published in the radical press. In “Why We Are Not Revolutionaries”, Pissarro stated that artists do not “preach” violence but says violence may be necessary. “For each act of individual revolt is a swing of the axe at the foundations of the social edifice which weighs us down.” Signac defined “the anarchist painter” not as making anarchist pictures, “but the one who struggles with his entire being against official and bourgeois conventions…”

The anarchist newspaper Le Père peinard was another intersection in an artistic movement filled with shared purposes. Luce drew the angry proletariat rolling up his sleeve for the masthead illustration and Félix Pissarro drew the front page’s editorial cartoon (figure A-15). The newspaper’s intended audience was the working class and its editorial content was written in Parisian street talk. Fénéon wrote art reviews here in slang catering to “prolos” that devotes much more attention to subject matter than his

180 Ibid, 249.
181 Clark, 102. La revolte, 1891.
182 Signac: Portrait of Signac, 47.
183 Le Père peinard, Jan. 29-Feb. 5, 1893.
formalist approach in Leftist journals. His review of Eugene Boch’s views of industrialized Belgium included pointed commentary on his figures; “Not much fun here, either, for these gals. The poor Janes do some tall work on sidewalks and mattresses and get regularly messed up, exposed to the low-down tricks of the mugs and the filthy treatment of the coppers.”

Subjects in Louis Anquetin’s work also caught Fénéon’s eye; “Sometimes he shows a guy sipping a snifter in a dive, sometimes a street sister makin’ eyes to pivot the passerby, or just some molls struttin’ their stuff in a garden.”

Given the context of Fénéon’s political writings that support violent action and ending the exploitation of the poor, a caustic remark tossed into a review of Pissarro took on a streak of menace: “Anything really new, to be accepted, requires that many fools die. We heartily wish this to happen as soon as possible.”

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184 Halperin, 259.
185 Ibid, 259.
186 Ibid, 108.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

F.F. began fading from view after being acquitted in the Trial of Thirty in 1894. Fénéon’s published fewer art reviews and political commentaries after the trial until he stopped writing altogether in the early 20th century. He lost his clerical post at the War Office and needed steady employment. He became an editor at *Revue Blanche* and after almost a decade there and short stints on centrist newspapers *Le Figaro* and *Matin*, until landing a new career in the art world.

Fénéon worked for the Bernheim-Jeune art gallery chain from 1906-24 in roles ranging from salesman to collector until his retirement at age 63. The Bernheim family jokingly called him *fainéant* meaning “do-nothing” spoofing his surname and his calculated nonchalance towards his job.\(^{187}\) He married Stephanie “Fanny” (née Goubaux) in 1897 and they remained together until his death in 1944 (Fanny Fénéon died in 1946). The once-passionate radical now wanted to live a quiet life with his wife (the Fénéons did not have children). He refused to allow friends to re-edit “Impressionists in 1886” and refused to write his memoirs. When he was asked to publish a collection of his darkly humorous news items *Novels in Three Lines*, Fénéon replied, “Je n’aspire qu’an silence.”\(^{188}\)

The epigraph at the beginning of this thesis was taken from Fénéon’s article on the Italian Symbolist critic Vittorio Pica. In that article, Fénéon encapsulated his function as a critic that begins with attempting to view artwork from the perspective of the artist and the viewpoint of the spectator. Fénéon’s role is to act as, “a channel for the one and for

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\(^{187}\) Halperin, 364. “His reputation for nonchalance made him sort of a divinity for us; he embodied *fainéantise*, the source of his very name, the mark of a monopoly, indeed a kind of royalty.”

\(^{188}\) Ibid, 364.
Fénéon’s articulation of these positions enabled the public to gain a greater understanding of an artist’s intentions and the specific artwork. This thesis examined the construction of Neo-Impressionism, the socio-political beliefs held by Fénéon and the group, his treatment of these artists and outlined Fénéon’s descriptions of Neo-Impressionist canvases.

Seurat, Signac, Luce and others attended similar subjects. Many of Seurat’s works depict the tense mixing of social classes at public spaces or spectacles. Signac produced uninhabited landscapes of the industrial suburbs and genre paintings satirizing bourgeois domesticity. Luce painted landscapes of slagheaps, factories, Leftist neighborhoods and portraits of working class people. Fénéon wrote about these subjects in columns for radical newspapers, but did not draw attention to this imagery in his art writing.

The thesis does not intend to judge Fénéon’s integrity as a critic nor dictate dogmatic standards that art critics must follow. This thesis is an intellectual biography that proposes F.F. is a rich subject deserving of a larger body of research. The title “True Colors” obviously refers to Fénéon’s theories about color, but determining Fénéon’s true colors requires continued close readings of his texts, inquiry into the critic’s political commitments, his personal relationships with artists and research focusing on political undercurrents in Neo-Impressionist subjects.

189 Ibid, 17. “The critic must be a discriminating and inclusive intellect, penetrating the soul of the artist, seizing his aesthetic personality, considering the work of art both from the point of view of the author and from the point of view of the public – a channel for the one and for the other.” From “Le Pica” in La Cravache, July 14, 1888.
APPENDIX
LIST OF ART WORKS CITED


14. Maximilien Luce. *L'Homme à sa toilette*. 1886, 92 x 73 cm, oil on canvas. Musée du petit palais, Geneva. [http://silartetaitconte.hautetfort.com/media/01/00/1419703684.jpg](http://silartetaitconte.hautetfort.com/media/01/00/1419703684.jpg)


LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

David M. Whitehead received his M.A. in art history from the University of Florida in 2012. His research focuses on 19th-century French art from Realism through Post-Impressionism. His interests include politics, the art market, art criticism, historiography, and the influence of popular culture on French painting. He will continue his Ph.D. studies at the University of Florida.