

MASS CULTURE AND UTOPIA: SEURAT AND NEOIMPRESSIONISM

THE ANTINOMIES OF GEORGES SEURAT

IN 1929, THE BRITISH CRITIC ROGER FRY WROTE THAT the art of Georges Seurat (1859–91) was stretched between the poles of “photographic literalness” and a condition “as abstract . . . as pictorial art ever attained.” This basic antinomy, I believe, accurately describes the efforts and achievements of Seurat and his Neoimpressionist followers. Born nearly a generation after the Impressionists, these artists sought to return Impressionism to its collective and democratic roots, while at the same time maintaining their personal and expressive autonomy. The goal was largely impracticable given the social and cultural constraints of the age, and resulted in an art of paradox: Neoimpressionism was guided at once by the lessons of science and by an often abstruse idealism; it was influenced both by popular culture and the elite art of the Classical and Academic tradition; it aimed to be at the same time politically tendentious and formally pure; it represented together the alienation of modern life and the utopian dream of a life of leisure and unending pleasure; and it was, in sum, intellectually rigorous and an “armchair for the tired businessman,” in Matisse’s words. By these antinomies, therefore, the art of Seurat and his followers laid the foundation for twentieth-century modernism, whose antinomies are named Picasso and Matisse, Mondrian and Miró, Albers and Rivera.

SEURAT’S DRAWINGS AND THEIR DISPERSION OF MEANING

The founder and leader of Neoimpressionism (and its only genius) was undoubtedly Georges Seurat. Apart from a few summers spent on the Normandy or Brittany coasts, he lived

his entire brief life in Paris, either in the company of his family in their apartment at 136 boulevard Magenta (halfway between the new Gare du Nord and the old Saint-Lazare Prison) or in his own apartment-studio. His mother was the daughter of a coachman turned jeweler, and his father was a minor civil servant and real estate speculator who retired early and spent his free time at a suburban villa at Le Raincy. The success of Antoine Seurat permitted Georges to take up an artist’s career without financial worry, but the young man was clearly affected by more than just the fortunate financial circumstances of his upbringing: he must have been impressed as well by the modernity of the section of Paris in which he lived, by the cultural novelty of suburban life at Le Raincy, and by the power of his father’s capital; these are all subjects represented in his mature art.

Initially trained in the industrial and decorative arts, Seurat applied for, and was granted, admission to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1878. He studied in the atelier of Henri Lehmann (1814–82) for a little more than a year before leaving on account of boredom, poor grades, and political ostracism (his fellows called him a *communard*). After a year of compulsory military service, Seurat returned to Paris, rented a studio with his friend Edmond-François Aman-Jean (1860–1935), and immediately proceeded to develop and refine a style of drawing that was utterly without precedent. In *Aman-jean* (1882–3) and *Echo* (1883), among many other works, Seurat largely dispensed with line, the one indispensable element of all previous drawings. In so doing, he also dispensed with meaning in the work of art, as formerly understood.

Aman-Jean is a large (24½ by 18¼ inches) independent portrait drawing in conté crayon on rough Michallet paper. The male subject is depicted in half-length profile with gaze directed to the lower right. His right hand is extended and



15.1 GEORGES SEURAT *Aman-Jean* 1882-3. Conté crayon, $24\frac{1}{2} \times 18\frac{1}{4}$
(62.2 $\times$ 46.4)



15.2 GEORGES SEURAT *The Echo* 1883. Conté crayon, $12\frac{1}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{4}$
(31.1 $\times$ 23.4)

15.3 holds a small brush with which he makes a mark on a surface nearly coincident with the right margin. *Echo* is exactly half the size of *Aman-Jean*, and is a highly finished study for Seurat's first major painting, *A Bathing Place, Asnières* (1883-4). The boy in the drawing is shown close up and in profile. His back and extended arms form an "L" which echoes the left and bottom margins of the paper; his cap is shaped into an isosceles triangle, and his nose and right forearm create a diagonal extending from upper left to lower right. His hands are cupped around his mouth in order to amplify a shout.

In both of these drawings, Seurat rubbed the greasy black crayon all over the surface of the paper in order to create a subtle continuum of dark and light uninterrupted by the hard contour of a line. (The only exception to this exclusion of line is the reinforcement of the profile of *Aman-Jean*.) Relief is created by the absence of crayon, as in the bare shoulders of the boy in *Echo*, and by contrasts of light and dark, as in the shirt collar and jacket lapels of *Aman-Jean*. Yet to speak of relief, modeling, and volume in these drawings is misleading; a simultaneous evanescence and tangibility is present here in areas of mass as much as in areas of shadow. Physical presence and absence commingle in a single, haunting rhetoric. *Aman-*

Jean and *Echo* are thus, in a sense, not representations at all. They are useless as interrogations of human character; they reveal nothing of the physical nature of the subjects they depict, they refuse any clear distinction between figure and ground, and they are valueless as renderings of the artist's personality or psyche. By abjuring line in his drawings, Seurat thus more closely approached pure abstraction than any artist we have considered so far. Because these drawings are so central to an understanding of Seurat's break with the Classical tradition, they must be considered a little further before we turn to his equally epochal paintings.

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 upon it. To Federico Zuccaro at the end of the sixteenth century, linear drawing had attained a nearly divine status: as the material expression of the Platonic *Idea*, drawing was the essential instrument for the representation of the divine within the human. Lines for him were both the means by which bodies were physically manifested in works of art (*disegno esterno*), and the material traces of the imagination and genius of the artist (*disegno interno*). Thus, the art of

drawing with lines had a moral, as well as a representational, value that allowed it to become the foundation for seven-teenth-century history paintings concerned with the great men and deeds of history, mythology, and religion. By the early nineteenth century, this Classical and idealist tradition of linear drawing was principally upheld by Ingres, who instructed his pupils (including Seurat's teacher Lehmann): "To draw does not simply mean to reproduce contours; drawing does not simply consist of line: drawing is also expression, the inner form, the surface modeling. . . . That is why the painters of expression among the moderns happen to have been the greatest draftsmen—witness Raphael!"

In addition to Ingres and his pupils, support for the tenets of Neoclassical art theory with its championing of the role of line in drawing came from Charles Blanc. An influential critic, esthetician, and pedagogue, Blanc wrote in his *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (1867), "that lines—straight, curved, horizontal and oblique—are directly related to our sentiments, and can themselves be expressive and eloquent." Even Delacroix and Manet, both of whom sought to dethrone line from its exalted rank, nevertheless found it indispensable for the creation of movement and plasticity in drawings. Yet in the hands of Seurat the tradition of linear drawing is ended and in its place is substituted the abstraction of what the art historian Bernd Growe has called a "light-dark continuum." Solid bodies are dissolved by the light emitted from beneath a carpet of conté crayon; light is given material substance by the ebb and flow of tonality. In *Aman-Jean* and *Echo*, the unseen canvas upon which the artist labors and the unheard shout of a working-class boy are perhaps Seurat's real subjects. "Meaning" in these drawings of Seurat, as in others, is thereby dispersed beyond the ragged and indefinite edges of the Michallet paper into a spectatorial space that is dynamic and contested. In this way, Seurat's drawings are very like his paintings: they are unusually, and radically, *critical* in their effort to spark an exchange between the artwork and the diverse classes and cultures the artist saw and depicted. By their rejection of meaning as it was formerly conceived—*within the circumscribed frame of the artwork*—Seurat's drawings and paintings therefore mark an attempt to restore social and political meaning to the work of art. Now their significance is to be determined, almost as never before, by a broad and diverse community of spectators responsive to the formal imperatives of art. Even as the works reject important aspects of Neoclassical art theory, they mark a return to the values of Revolutionary, Neoclassical history painting as practised by David exactly one hundred years earlier.

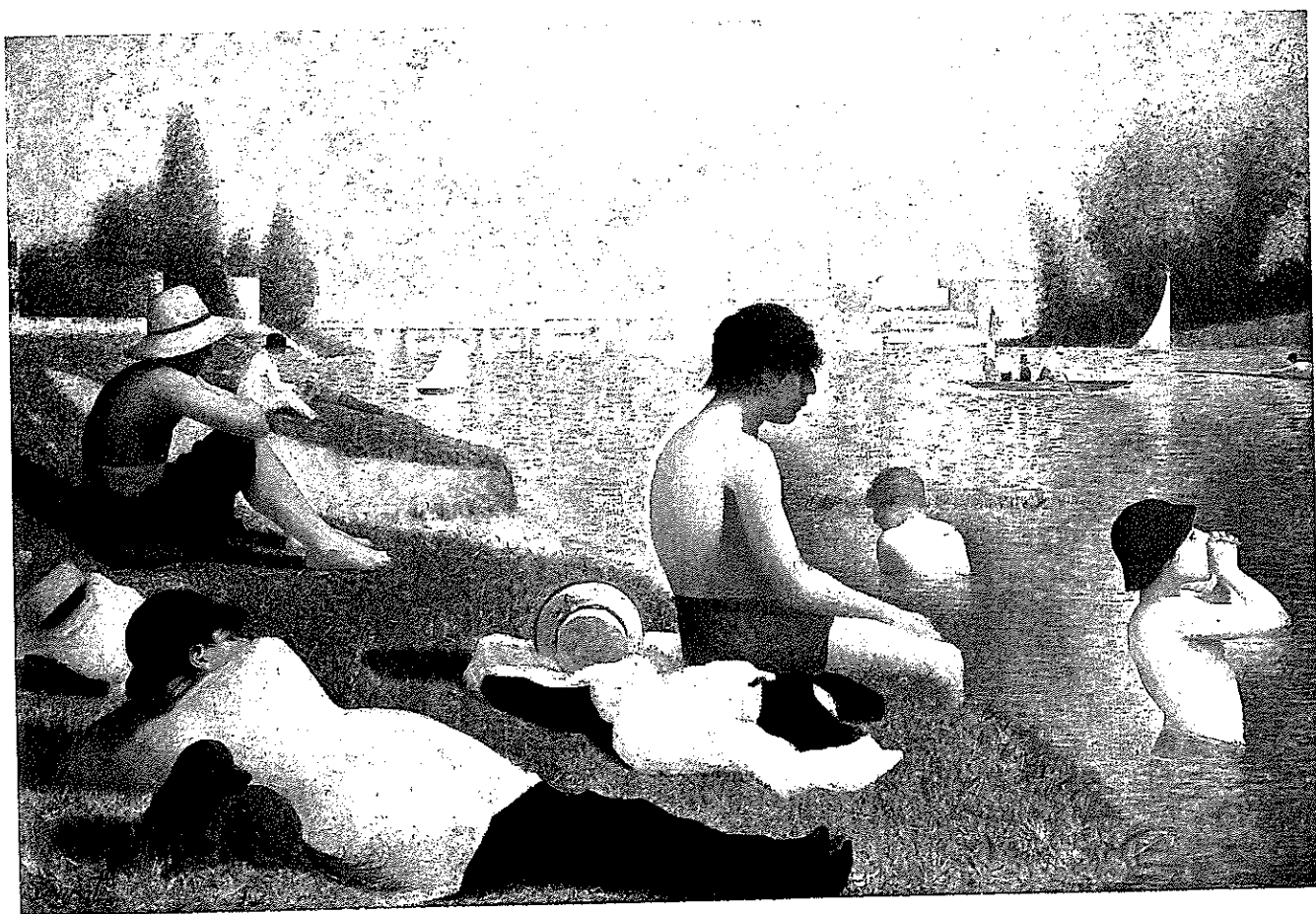
Seurat studied and understood the contested spaces and cultural diversity of the city that lay beyond the frame of his canvas and studio door. In his youth he frequented the newly built working-class park of the Buttes-Chaumont just a few

blocks east of his family's apartment. Further east was his father's retreat at Le Raincy, a suburban area only recently subdivided into lots for middle-class "villas." Thus Seurat was already familiar with the complex signs of social class on display in the Haussmannized urban and suburban leisure spaces of Paris, when he and some of his friends began to spend time at Clichy, Asnières, and the Island of the Grande Jatte. *Bathing Place, Asnières* is a heroically scaled (79 by 118 inches) depiction of working-class men and boys relaxing and bathing at a well-known if somewhat down-at-heel resort on the left bank of the Seine. The picture, composed out of a regularized and systematized Impressionist palette and facture, was refused by the Salon judges, and was instead shown twice in 1884 at jury-free exhibitions of the Artistes Indépendants, a large group which included Odilon Redon and Paul Signac (1863–1935). There it was acclaimed by a handful of Naturalist writers, critics, and artists, including Signac, who would form the nucleus of a movement dubbed by the writer, art critic, and anarchist Félix Fénéon "Neo-impressionism." The "manifesto" of the new movement, however, as the critic Maurice Hermel called it, appeared two years later at the eighth and last Impressionist Exhibition, in the form of Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* (1884–6).

A "MANIFESTO PAINTING": *A SUNDAY AFTERNOON ON THE ISLAND OF THE GRANDE JATTE*

Seurat's *Grande Jatte* is a life-sized depiction of a Sunday idyll at a suburban park located on a small, narrow island opposite the banks of Asnières. Women, men, and children of all classes are got up in their good clothes to picnic, promenade, boat, fish, and gaze upon one another on this particular sunny, Sabbath noon. A black labrador grazes, a pug gambols, and a monkey poses in the foreground. Above, trees form an intermittent canopy while a cotton swab floats across the sky at upper left. The island and its habitués constitute a modern Cythera, but with this difference: the pleasure appears extremely vitiated. The critic Henri Fèvre wrote in May 1886:

Little by little, one understands the intention of the painter; the dazzle and blindness lift and one becomes familiar with, divines, sees and admires the great yellow patch of grass eaten away by the sun, the clouds of golden dust in the treetops, the details that the retina, dazzled by light, cannot make out; then one understands the stiltedness of the Parisian promenade, stiff and distorted; even its recreation is affected. . . . It is materialist Puvis de Chavannes, a coarse summary of nature, savagely colored.



15.3 GEORGES SEURAT *A Bathing Place, Asnières* 1883–4. Oil on canvas, 79 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 9'10 (200.9 × 299.7)

Another critic, Alfred Paulet, wrote: "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." Seurat's *Grande Jatte* is thus at once an ingenuously Impressionist image of suburban recreation and leisure, and a critical Realist picture of the artifice and alienation of modern class society. His mentors are at once Monet, the author of *La Grenouillère* (*The Frog Pond*), and Manet, the painter of *Le Déjeuner* (*Luncheon*).

Even a cursory glance at the picture, however, reveals that its style differs markedly from works by either of these two painters. Unlike them, but in common with some academicians, Seurat is rigid and systematic in his method. "The Pan-Athenaic Frieze of Phidias [on the Parthenon] was a procession," Seurat told his friend the poet and critic Gustave Kahn in 1888, "I want to make the moderns file past like figures on that frieze, in their essential form, to place them in compositions arranged harmoniously by virtue of the directions of the colors and lines, line and color arranged in

accordance with one another." Like the Academic muralist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–98), whose *The Sacred Grove* (1884) was exhibited at the Salon in the very year the *Grande Jatte* was begun, Seurat has subjected his landscape and especially his figures to a strict proportional and Classical schema based upon Vitruvius: heads are $\frac{1}{2}$ the height of bodies, and faces are turned precisely full frontal, $\frac{1}{4}$ view, full profile, $\frac{1}{4}$ from the back, or full back. Seurat is equally rule-bound in his application of color, though in this case the source is contemporary color theory written by Michel-Eugène Chevreul, Charles Henry, and especially Ogden Rood. Atop a thin underpainting consisting of broad, rectangular strokes of a few closely related hues of local color, Seurat carefully placed curved, horizontal, vertical, or crisscrossed strokes of unmixed or partially blended paint. Above this he applied myriad, nearly identically sized dabs or points of mostly unblended complementary and adjacent colors, animating the surface and causing it to take on the quality of a mosaic.

Rejecting the relative tonal sobriety of Puvis, Seurat employed this technique of "Chromo-luminarism," as he

called it, in order to achieve a luminosity that would exceed even that in Impressionist paintings. Fénéon was informed by Seurat of his methods in 1886 and published them that year:

These colors, isolated on the canvas, recombine on the retina: we have, therefore, not a mixture of material colors (pigments), but a mixture of differently colored rays of light. Need we recall that even when the colors are the same, mixed pigments and mixed rays of light do not necessarily produce the same results? It is also generally understood that the luminosity of optical mixtures is always superior to that of material mixture, as the many equations worked out by M. Rood demonstrate.

years between 1885 and 1890. His *L'Ile Lacroix, Rouen, Mist* (1888) employs a subtle palette of white, pink, and green in the brightly lit areas, and complementary orange and blue in the shadows. Its carefully divided brushstrokes were an attempt to master the "laws" of colored light, and to produce, as he wrote, "a robust art, based on sensation." 15.8

In fact, however, Fénéon, Seurat, and his followers misunderstood the color theories of the American physicist Ogden Rood, believing he had claimed that *every* material mixture was deficient in luminosity when compared to color achieved by optical mix. This misunderstanding resulted in colors in the *Grande Jatte* that Emile Hennequin, as early as 1886, correctly perceived to be "dusty or lusterless" and "almost entirely lacking in luminosity," especially in those areas, such as the trousers of the reclining man in the left foreground or the dress of the woman with the fishing pole, where complementary dots or strokes of paint have been intermingled. Nevertheless, Seurat continued in his pursuit of a scientific esthetic, and was soon convinced that he had indeed discovered, as Kahn wrote, "scientifically, with the experience of art . . . the law of pictorial color."

In a short letter of 1890, Seurat described his method. Under the rubric "Esthetic," he wrote:

Art is Harmony.

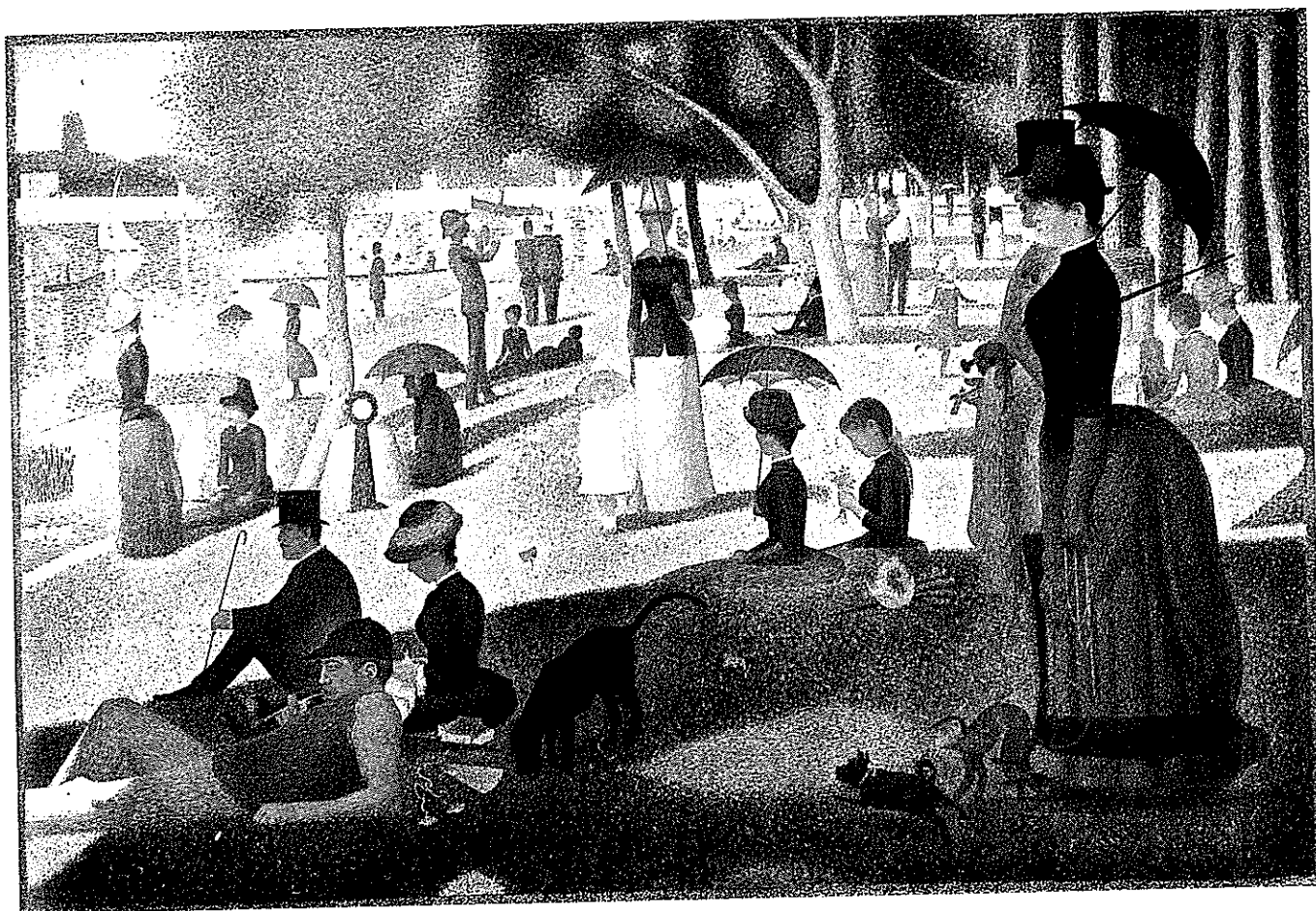
Harmony is the analogy of opposites, the analogy of similarities of *tone*, of *tint*, of *line*, taking account of a dominant, and under the influence of the lighting, in combinations that are gay, calm or sad.

Further on, beneath the word "Technique," he wrote:

The following year, Fénéon again expounded the technique of Seurat and his colleagues Signac, Lucien Pissarro (1863–1944, Camille's son), Maximilien Luce (1858–1941), Charles Angrand (1854–1926), and Albert Dubois-Pillet (1845–90), whose works were on display at the third annual exhibition of the Société des Artistes Indépendants. Calling them "Neoimpressionists" for their rejection of Impressionism's "fugitive appearances," he described their attempts, in such works as Signac's *The Gasometer at Clichy* (1886) and *The Dining Room, Breakfast* (1886–7), to "synthesize the landscape in a definitive aspect which perpetuates the sensation [it produces]. . . . Step back a bit [from their pictures] and all these variocolored spots melt into undulating, luminous masses; the brushwork vanishes, so to speak; the eye is no longer solicited by anything but the essence of painting." Even the mature Camille Pissarro was intoxicated by Chromo-luminarism, practising it for approximately five 15.7



15.4 PIERRE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES *The Sacred Grove* 1884. Oil on canvas, 36½ × 91 (92.6 × 231)



15.5 GEORGES SEURAT *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* 1884–6. Oil on canvas, 81¼ × 10' 1¼ (207.6 × 307.9)

Given the phenomenon [. . .] of the duration of the luminous impression on the retina, [. . .]

Synthesis is logically the result.

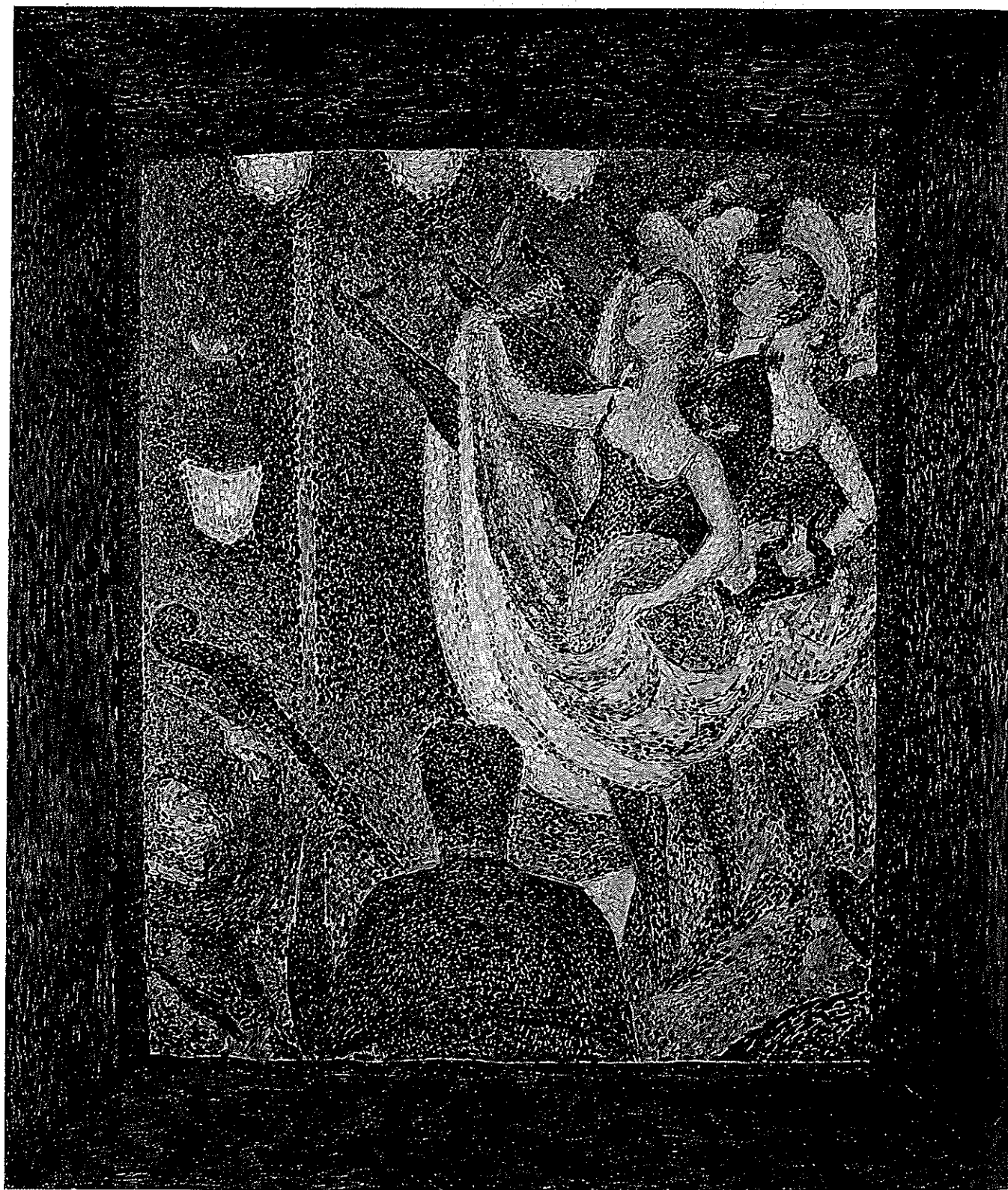
The means of expression is the optical mixture of tones, of tints (of local color and the illuminating color: sun, oil lamp, gas, etc.), that is, of the lights and their reactions (shadows) following the laws of *contrast*, of gradation, of irradiation.

The frame [. . .] is in a harmony opposed to those of the tones, tints and lines of the [. . .] picture.

The basis of Seurat's method, as he wrote, was color "contrast" and "synthesis," his motto "Art is Harmony" was thus a proclamation that beauty arises from a continuous process of opposition and resolution among contrasting colors, values, and lines. (Line must here be understood primarily to mean direction.) This dynamic relationship, moreover, was extended by Seurat beyond the limits of the canvas to the frame, and then beyond the frame to the world of the spectator. According to the testimony of the poet and critic

Emile Verhaeren, Seurat compared his painted frames, spectacularly represented by his landscape *Le Crottoy, Upstream* (1889), to the stagecraft of Wagner's opera house at Bayreuth, in which the contrast between the illuminated stage and the darkened theater "is continued and extends itself to meet the eye of the spectator."

By means of Seurat's scientific and dialectic approach to painting, in which the barriers between artwork and world are broken down, he sought to restore to painting the cultural significance it had lost with the demise of Classicism and Academic history painting. The artist's only known comment about the *Grande Jatte*, set down much later by Signac, should be taken as an indicator of his respect for the Davidian paradigm: "In another vein I would just as willingly have painted the struggle between the Horatii and the Curatii." By means of his relentless focus upon the laws of harmony, Seurat sought as well to return to the enterprise of painting the social and collective meaning it had lost with the destruction, as we have seen, of Courbet's project of Realism. Indeed, Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*, despite the differences in color and tonality,



15.6 GEORGES SEURAT Final study for *Chahut* 1889. Oil on canvas, 21⁷/₈ × 18³/₈ (55.6 × 46.7)

is recalled by the *Grande Jatte*: both are large, indeed heroically, scaled pictures depicting occasions of awkward, and ambiguously classed, rituals.

15.10 Idealist and Realist, Classical and modernist, the *Grande Jatte* may thus be said to possess, like its author, in Meyer Schapiro's words, "an earnest democratic spirit;" it affirms the right and opportunity of a diverse audience, like the Sunday crowd in the picture itself, to become legitimate and critical spectators of painting. Like many modernists to follow, Seurat sought to break down the distinction between artist and worker, fine and industrial art. It is significant that when asked by his friend the critic Octave Maus the selling price of *The Models* (1886–8), a depiction of working-class models relaxedly posed against the starched bourgeoisie in the *Grande Jatte*, Seurat computed its value like a day laborer would figure his wages: "one year at 7 francs a day." When asked by Angrand about the significance of his works, Seurat replied: "They [writers and critics] see poetry in what I do. No. I apply my method and that is all." Indeed, for Seurat and the Neoimpressionists, as for few other artists of the time, the division between the physical creation and intellectual cognition of the artwork was nearly absolute. Painted in discrete dots of color, applied according to a preconceived system, Neoimpressionist pictures are a kind of exaggeration or parody of the very type of industrial and alienated labor then expanding in France, in which workers see no relationship between their individual work-gesture and the final product. To what, then, can be attributed the sense of alienation and isolation perceived by contemporary and subsequent critics of the *Grande Jatte*? Precisely this: that it was a picture which sought to discover and employ a rationalized, esthetic formula for the representation of idleness, quietness, and pleasure. Short of a revolution in daily life and labor, these two halves could not make a whole; the result was parody.

MASS CULTURE AND THE PARADOX OF PLEASURE: *CHAHUT*

15.11 The paradoxical nature of Seurat's quest for harmony is unmistakably manifest in his pictures of popular entertain-
15.14 ments—*Sideshow* (1887–8), *Chahut* (1889–90), and *Circus* (1890–91)—all shown at exhibitions of the Salon des Indépendants. In *Chahut* Seurat depicts two men and two women performing the vulgar quadrille known as the Chahut on a stage in a dance hall like those he knew in Montmartre (it is almost certainly the *café-concert* known as Le Divan Japonais at 75 rue des Martyrs). In fact, we are seeing the climax of the performance, or the curtain call, when the dancers break out of their square, form a line, and perform a

few last high kicks for the crowd. The members of the orchestra are embraced by the extended legs of the foreground female dancer, like a great erotic parenthesis; the bass player is seen in the extreme foreground with his back to us and his instrument pointed upward and to the left; the flute player is recognizable by his hands and instrument in the lower left corner; the conductor is shown in profile with raised head, arm, baton, and moustache; and two fiddlers are indicated by the presence of their raised bows.

The audience in *Chahut*, seated in the *parterre* or pit beside the musicians, consists of a gentleman in the lower right, described by Kahn as "pig-snouted," but otherwise nattily dressed in hat, cane, and overcoat with flowered lapel, and three other figures on the opposite side of the runway—from right to left, a woman wearing a crown like the Statue of Liberty's, a woman wearing a feathered toque, and a man with a bald head and beard. Everything else about the picture is obscure—the gas lamps at the top and those suspended in mid-air at the left, the vertical bar or pole approximately one quarter the distance from the left margin, the location of the rear wall, the precise arrangement of seating for audience and orchestra, and the curious vignette-shape of the picture itself within its painted frame. Equally mysterious is the mood of the picture. In *Chahut*, it would seem, Seurat paradoxically depicts both a dream of unrestrained pleasure and a nightmare vision of vulgarity.

The opposition was observed and ascribed political significance at the time by Kahn when he wrote: "If you are looking at all costs for a 'symbol,' you will find it in the contrast between the beauty of the dancer, an elegant and modest sprite, and the ugliness of her admirer; in the hieratic structure of the canvas and its subject, a contemporary ignominy." Signac had a similar view of the picture, which he expressed in 1891, just a few months after Seurat's death. He wrote that by painting images of working-class life, "or better still, the pleasures of decadence like dance halls, *chahuts* and circuses—as the painter Seurat did, who had such a vivid perception of the degeneration of our transitional era—[the Neoimpressionists] bring their evidence to the great social trial that is taking place between workers and Capital." One way to understand the opposition of dream and nightmare in *Chahut* is simply to say, following Kahn, that in the Montmartre cabarets where Chahuts are performed, the dancers experience the utopian delight of free and expressive movement while the audience is subjected to the dystopia of bad food and spirits, seedy surroundings, and lewd display. In fact, however, the opposite can just as easily be claimed. We may say, following Signac, that in the Parisian dance called Chahut, the performers are no "sprites," but are reduced to mere automata; their limbs, buttocks, breasts, crotches, and smiles are visibly alienated from their bodies and their minds



15.7 PAUL SIGNAC *The Dining Room, Breakfast* 1886-7. Oil on canvas, $35 \times 45\frac{1}{2}$ (89 $\times$ 115)

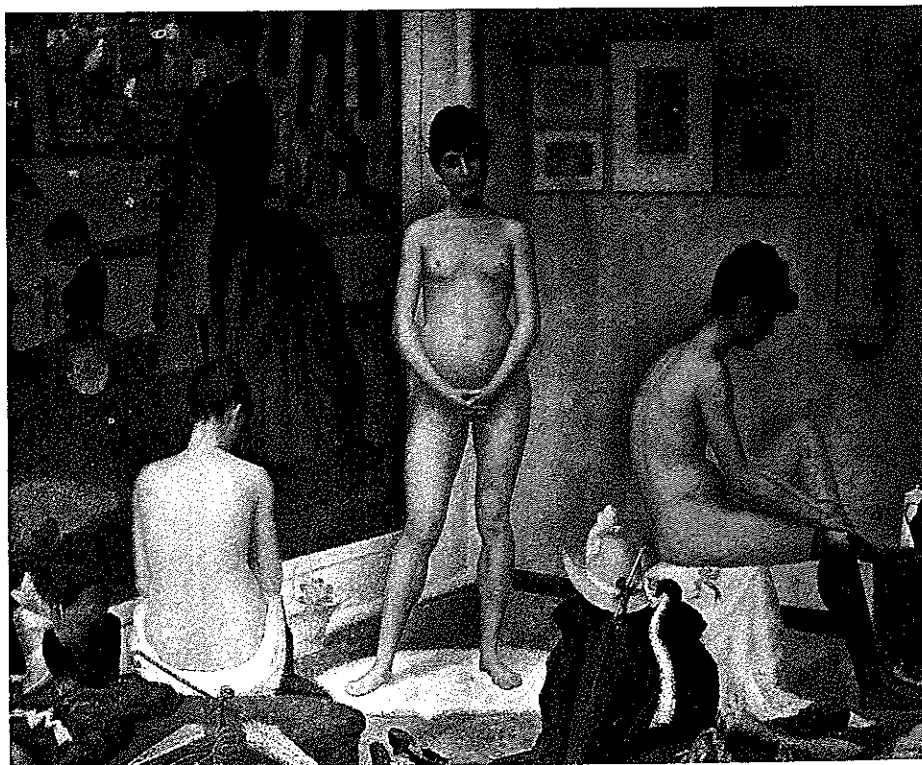
15.8 CAMILLE PISSARRO *L'Isle Lacroix, Rouen, Mist* 1888. Oil on canvas, $18\frac{3}{4} \times 21\frac{7}{8}$ (44 $\times$ 55)





15.9 GEORGES SEURAT *Le Crotay, Upstream* 1889. Oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ $\times$ 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ (73 $\times$ 93.3)

15.10 GEORGES SEURAT *The Models* 1886-8. Oil on canvas, 79 $\times$ 98 $\frac{3}{4}$ (200.6 $\times$ 250.8)





15.11 GEORGES SEURAT *Chahut*
1889–90. Oil on canvas, 66½ × 55¼
(168.9 × 140.9)

in a dystopia of fetishism and objectification. At the same time, the spectators are treated to the utopian pleasures of music, light, frenetic dance, and sexual stimulation.

Each of these antinomies is equally plausible and implausible: how can the performers actually have experienced the delight of free and expressive movement when we know that their dance was designed precisely to subordinate expressivity in favor of crude sexual display? On the other hand, how can the performers have felt alienated and degraded when their kicks are so clearly exuberant and they wear such broad smiles? Regarding the spectators, how can they have suffered the dystopia of degradation and exploitation, when they are so clearly enraptured and so splendidly attired? On the other hand, how can we assert that the audience has experienced the joyous utopia of sensual stimulation and erotic delight, when they themselves are barred from the dance and, apparently,

from human companionship? Everyone came alone to the Chahut. (The bald man with the beard and the woman with the toque might just belong together, but they are separated by the neck of the bass viol and anyway make an unlikely couple.)

The question which arose in considering the *Grande Jatte* must be considered again: is *Chahut* a satire? If so, why did Seurat go to such lengths to include tonal, linear, and coloristic devices that, he believed, would guarantee that his picture would stimulate feelings of joyousness in his audience? The predominating high luminosity, warm hues, and upward pointed angles and accents (lines) were believed by him to be conducive to happiness. In the letter cited earlier, Seurat wrote: "*Gaiety of tone* is the luminous dominant, *of tint*, the warm dominant, *of line*, lines above the horizontal." *Chahut* contains just this vocabulary of gaiety. In *Chahut*, it would



15.12 HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC *Le Divan Japonais* 1892–3. Color lithograph poster, 31 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 24 (80.8 × 60.8)

seem, Seurat set out to make a democratic and happy picture.

And yet, no matter what we know of Seurat's esthetic theories and practise, the imputation of satire remains inescapable when actually viewing *Chahut*. The conviction is even further strengthened if we compare the painting to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's (1864–1901) lithographed poster of the same cabaret, *Le Divan Japonais* (1892–3). Toulouse-Lautrec depicts uncritically the Parisian world of fashion and celebrity; the popular *chanteuse* Yvette Guilbert is shown on stage (her head audaciously cut off by the top edge of the poster), above the dancer Jane Avril (in one of her famous and outlandish hats) and her companion Edouard Dujardin, the dandified founder of the avant-garde *Revue Wagnérienne*. No such celebrity and playful in-joking is in evidence in Seurat's picture. At some level, then, Kahn and Signac must be right in their perception of social and political criticism in *Chahut*. As with the *Grande Jatte*, Seurat has created a painting which records the paradox—both the alienation and the delight—of modern leisure and mass culture.

Indeed, mass culture in Seurat's day was, as we have already begun to understand (see Chapter 13), new and

contradictory. Upon entering Seurat's *Divan Japonais*, Degas's *Cirque Fernando* (in his *Miss Lola at the Cirque Fernando*, 1879), Manet's *Folies-Bergère*, or the hundreds of other theaters and places of entertainment depicted by French and European artists of the late nineteenth century, things were not what they seemed. Take the question of the theater audience, for example. Occupying "the center seats in the pit, under the chandelier or *lustre*," writes Baedeker's in 1888, "the *claque*, or paid applauders, form an annoying, although characteristic feature in most of the theatres . . . and are easily recognized by the obtrusive and simultaneous vigor of their exertions. There are even *entrepreneurs de succès dramatique*, a class of mercantile adventurers who furnish theaters with *clagues* at stated terms."

At the many Paris *cafés chantants*, or nightclubs, the guide continues, "the music and singing is never of a high class, while the audience is of a very mixed character. . . . The alluring display of the words *entrée libre* outside the *cafés chantants* is a ruse to attract the public, as each visitor is obliged to order refreshments (*consommation*), which are generally of inferior quality." If the innocent visitor chooses



15.13 JULES CHÉRET *Le Bal du Moulin Rouge* 1889. Lithograph poster, 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ (59.7 × 41.9)

instead to attend one of the innumerable balls or dance halls of Paris, things are no better:

The balls, which take place all the year round at public dancing rooms, may be regarded as one of the specialties of Paris. Many of these entertainments, however, have for some years past been to a great extent "got up" for the benefit of strangers, numbers of the supposed visitors being hired as decoys by the lessee of the saloon. . . . At the Bal Bullier . . . a famous establishment in its way, the dancing of the students and artisans with their *étudiantes* and *ouvrières* is generally of a wild and Bacchanalian character. Here the famous Can-Can may be seen.

In *Chahut*, Seurat appears to have depicted a fully professionalized performance, and not a mock amateur can-can danced by ersatz students and workers. The audience seems genuine enough (they are not applauding), and no particular inducements are in evidence. But if Seurat omits from his painting any obvious clues as to the put-on nature of the audience, the location, and the performance, it is only because he understood that these entertainments were sufficiently effective and insidious even without ostentatious guile. His knowledge and respect for the power of mass culture is revealed, for example, by his admiration and even occasional emulation, as the art historian Robert Herbert has shown, of the cabaret posters of Jules Chéret (*Le Bal du Moulin Rouge*, 1889, for example). In 1891, Verhaeren described Seurat's affinity for Chéret: "The poster artist Chéret, whose genius he greatly admired, had charmed him with the joy and the gaiety of his designs. He had studied them, wanting to analyze their means of expression and uncover their aesthetic secrets." Chéret had apparently understood the secret allure of mass culture and found a recipe for representing it in his posters. Perhaps Seurat could take a lesson from him and also discover what underlay the hypnotic power of the nascent culture industry.

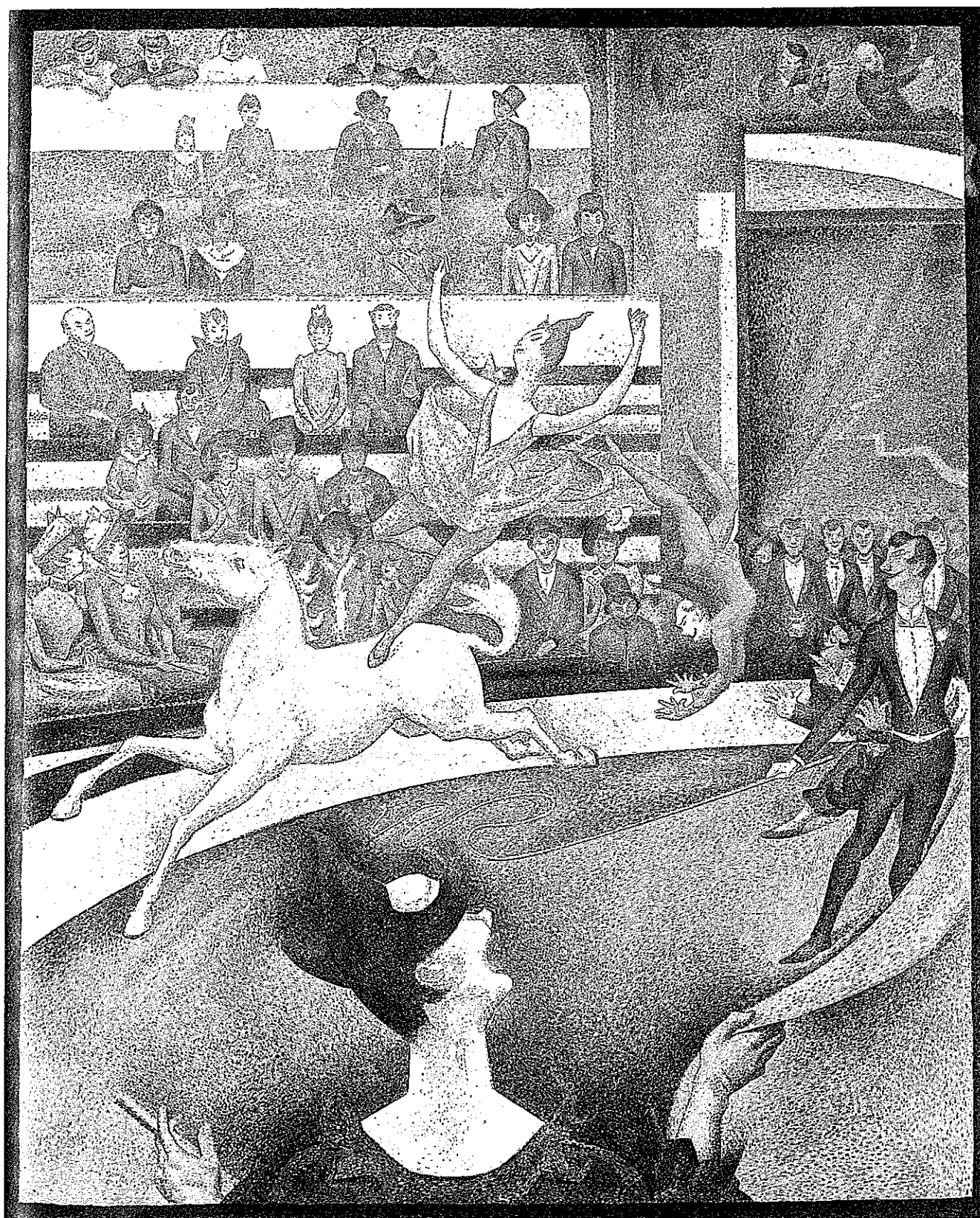
A highly cultured and circumspect man (Degas called him "the notary"), Seurat must have felt a profound ambivalence about the world of artifice and contrived pleasures in *Chahut* and *Circus*, his last painting. On the one hand, he surely deplored its vulgarity and reduction of the spectator to the condition of passive spectator, but on the other, he probably saw it as offering working people a place of refuge—even

perhaps a sense of honor; notice the serried ranks of smiling spectators in *Circus*. Like the modern factory, the sideshows, dance halls and circuses were alienating, yet the alienation was collective. Perhaps some sense of camaraderie, some collective desire for freedom and autonomy could be salvaged from even this world; perhaps the artist could be instrumental in providing a new (harmonic) vocabulary through which this freedom could be felt and even acted upon by everyone?

At Asnières, the Grande Jatte, and the other new haunts provided by a growing culture industry, Seurat understood that he was witnessing the very utopia of which he dreamed, as well as its opposite. This dialectic was succinctly described by the social critic and philosopher Herbert Marcuse in 1937, in terms that might have been inspired by the pictures of Seurat:

In suffering the most extreme reification, humans triumph over reification. The artistry of the beautiful body, its effortless agility and relaxation, which can be displayed today only in the circus, vaudeville and burlesque, herald the joy to which humans will attain in being liberated from the ideal. Once humankind, having become a true [independent] subject, succeeds in the mastery of matter . . . when sensuality, in other words, is entirely released by the soul, then the first glimmer of a new culture emerges.

In the very degradation of the performers at these venues, in the very objectification of the body, in the very focus upon the erotic at the expense of the ideal, Seurat must have seen anticipations of the world of harmony and pleasure of which he dreamed. Indeed, modern mass culture, of which the parks, cabarets, and circuses of Paris are early examples, is construed from just this dialectic of alienation and freedom: the pleasures it offers are at once the result of the extremely circumscribed act of commodity consumption and of the anticipatory utopian joy of "effortless agility" and the "mastery of matter." Seurat's achievement was to explore this paradox through an art that was itself dialectical. The drawings and paintings of Seurat are at once relentlessly scientific and ingratiatingly popular; they are by turns abstract and literal, formalist and naturalist. Along with the works of Toulouse-Lautrec and Vincent Van Gogh, to which we shall now turn, they were among the last such synthesizing efforts of the nineteenth century.



15.14 GEORGES SEURAT *The Circus* 1890–91. Oil on canvas, 73 × 60 (185.4 × 152.4)