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IN THE FOREGROUND:
OBJECT STUDIES
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"FROM IMITATION TO EVOLUTION": EMMELYN BUTTERFIELD-ROSEN ON GEORGES SEURAT'S *A SUNDAY ON LA GRANDE JATTE—1884*

Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884*.
Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection.

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Transcript

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Join us for an immersive personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode speak with Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen, a historian of modern art and cultural history, and Associate Director of the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art. Emmelyn walks us into Georges Seurat's masterpiece, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884*, the kind of painting that has become so ubiquitous it almost disappears into itself, but Emmelyn reveals other layers, describing how this picture manifests a shift in thinking from imitation to evolution, linked to Darwin's contemporaneous theories of natural selection.

Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen
It's strange that I can't really remember whatsoever the moment when I became interested in Georges Seurat, or *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884*. That's the official title. The painting, which was exhibited in 1886 at the final Impressionist exhibition, eventually became a touchstone for me, and a key point of departure for the book that I just wrote, which is about how conventions for posing and positioning the bodies of human figures were really radically transformed in European art of the late 19th century.

My point of entry into that project was from a really different work, actually. I was I was probably 12 or 13 years old when I saw a reconstruction of the 1912 ballet *Afternoon of a Faun*. And I think I remember those 10 minutes in which the dance unfolded probably better than any other visual experience in my whole life. In this dance, the performers—seven nymphs and a faun, who is costumed to look a bit like a cow or a piebald horse—these dancers contort their bodies to appear only frontally or in profile in relation to the spectator, as if they're in trapped on the surface of an arcane bas relief, and moving back and forth across the front of the stage as if their movements are constrained to parallel tracks, with this radically stiffened, constrained style of movement… with

this very unusual movement style. They act out a sort of affectless drama, I would say, about sexual curiosity, self-display, thwarted seduction. Or maybe a seduction that even doesn't want to succeed, one that culminates in this memorable moment of the faun retreating alone to a rock and having an apparent masturbatory orgasm.

A decade later, when I began my graduate studies in art history, I came back to the ballet and I began very falteringly, and over the course of yet another decade or maybe more, trying to construct an intellectual, historical context for what happens in the ballet *Afternoon of a Faun,* in terms of what the choreography asks of its performers, and simply in terms of the sheer positionality in their bodies, and also the sexual script that it writes for its performers, which of course included its choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, who was the faun. And this led me in so many directions, including deep into the history of psychology, and particularly psychoanalytic theories of infantile sexuality and unconscious thinking, but also to the history of art history and the kind of writing that was happening around or before 1900 by European scholars trying to think about how and why bodies were positioned in certain kinds of ways, in different kinds of art, like archaic Greek or Egyptian art, or a Syrian relief sculpture. And I think it was in the course of all of that that I was led back to Seurat, back to *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte.*

[musical interlude]

A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884 is a massive painting. It's about 7 by 10 feet, and it contains about 50 human figures. They range from the life-size figures in the foreground, to in the background, barely more than a centimeter, there are these tiny, miniscule figures. There's this almost vertiginous expanse of scale. I think really importantly it also contains an array of fauna. There are three dogs, a black lab with an amazing graphic black tail, and then perhaps a pug and a spaniel; more in the background a butterfly pinioned to the frontal surface, floating in the air. And then also this monkey, I think it's probably a Capuchin monkey—named after the monks, with their kind of specific monk-like

headdress. And this monkey is on a leash. It's a pet. It's the pet of the life-size, standing woman who appears in the bottom right foreground of the canvas. She appears in a pure profile, wearing an elaborate bustle, or a false ass as it was called at this time, with the swooping posterior curve. And it's replicated in so many ways, this curve: in the angle of her umbrella that she tilts just so, and also, even more significantly, I think, in the posture and spiraling tail of her pet. So much ink has been spilled on this picture by so many significant, field-defining art historians—Linda Nochlin, Meyer Shapiro, Jonathan Crary—I could go on and on. For me, what I was so struck by, and what hadn't really been talked about before, was the body language of these figures, the way in which they're physically positioned within the frame of the picture.

Seurat does something that I might call a de-articulation of the figure. By which I mean that he's radically de-emphasizing the extremities—the hands, the feet, even the face—which in prior centuries of European figural pedagogy, and including pedagogy that Seurat himself had received, were seen as the most important kind of points of the body to convey. Seurat has this really emphatic tendency to neglect the terminal portions of the limbs. In many cases, the figures don't seem to have hands. They hold their arms so tightly against their torsos that at first glance you don't see that they have arms. And then those figures in the painting that do have arms, they have this weird kind of angularity. And you can't really see the hands that seem to hold or grasp the various accoutrements of all of these people—the flowers, the fishing rods, the walking sticks. Their capacity to grasp seems awkward or unbelievable.

Part of the weightless quality of this painting also has a lot to do with the technique itself of pointillism. So Seurat has this tendency to neglect the feet; they're either invisible because you don't see them under the skirts, or the figures who are standing, you don't really see their feet, or else they seem to be positioned on these dark green shadows that almost looked like the pedestals of sculptures, or the pedestals of little Victorian toys that are as if these figures can't stand without some kind of appendage. You don't really have a sense that

these figures are planting their weight on that green grass, which is there with them.

I think it's also really important that there's no lateral twisting around the vertical axis of the spinal column in these figures. There's no oblique torsion, the heads and the trunks in the lower bodies never turn in opposing directions. They're all one piece. All of the various cast of characters here are aligned in a regimented order. They're either parallel or perpendicular to the picture plane. Although there are a few exceptions that basically prove the rule. That's a very important part of what was so radical and surprising to Seurat's contemporaries about his technique of the figure.

When I started studying this painting and looking at the reviews published in the popular press in 1886, I kept finding evidence that the public response to this picture was it was evidently attracting crowds who are responding with both hostility and laughter. They were extraordinarily fixated on the technique of figuration, the sense that something was missing from these figures: a sense of liveliness, or thought, or intellectual interiority. And they were particularly also very focused on the figures in the right corner, the woman in the monkey.

Understanding *why* was something that kind of set me on a new path. In my research, when I began working on Seurat, when I began working on a project about body language and its transformation in European art, circa 1900, I didn't actually ever expect that it was going to make me have to be a scholar of Darwin. But there was a moment when I discovered a particular caricature of Darwin. And I don't even know why I was reading about Darwin at that time, but it's actually quite a well-known caricature of Darwin, who was always caricatured as a monkey. After the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, before the publication of *Descent of Man* in 1871, Darwin was often shown with his iconic face, with his big, long, white beard, on the body of a monkey, always with the long tail. And [in the caricature] Darwin as monkey is next to this bustled woman, and his tail is spiraling up between his legs and a lavish S curve. I think

he's taking the pulse of this woman, who's also in profile, just like in Seurat's picture. And she's saying to him, "*Really*, Mr. Darwin!"

I think that some of the key aspects of the paradigm shift in thinking the 19th century public associated with the name Darwin get condensed in *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, and this goes beyond the most obvious feature, the presence of the monkey—the animal that alongside the peacock came to stand in for Darwin's theory for most people. Which was it was a theory that was interestingly, I think, kind of assimilated images. We have the monkey and the girl shown as a visual emblem, I think, for the animal ancestry of the human species, but also in a manner that crucially links that animal ancestry to a particular type of sexualized bodily display and behavior. I'm thinking about how the profile posture of the monkey's owner seems in its pure profile to be angled to display most graphically that swoop of the bustle and the dramatically enlarged posterior, and how the monkey's spiraling tail delineates a curve that echoes that posterior swoop of the bustle.

In that sense, I think the presence of the monkey demands that we perceive the owner of the monkey in animalistic terms, standing in as an emblem for descent with modification by means of natural selection, to use the Darwinian term. But [it] also gestures towards Darwin's controversial theory of sexual selection. The theory typically embodied for 19th century publics by the figure of the peacock, I think, in *La Grande Jatte*, the monkey articulates an analogy between the attractive functions of modern fashion and bodily ornament within the animal kingdom. I think part of that is this sense that we're not quite sure what is the nature of the transaction, or relationship or interaction, between this woman and the man who's barely visible just behind her.

Beyond these details, I think there are other more structural features which make Seurat's modern life canvas such an apt summation of the paradigm shift associated with the name Darwin, just to stay with the treatment of the living beings that populate the picture. It's important that the treatment of the body, this body language that I was talking about, the elimination of the variety of

gestures, and the dynamic bodily movements that we might expect to find in such a picture, had the effect for viewers in the 19th century of making the human beings appear as what is often described as "automaton-like." It wasn't described in that way precisely in the 19th century, but crucially as something less than fully conscious, as engaged in a kind of mindless, routinized, habitual, or even instinctive behavior. And in that sense, I think also that the picture encapsulates the impact of Darwin's theory for understandings of human psychology.

Darwin thought for himself that the recognition of the genealogical relations of all living species would entail that psychology would be placed on a new foundation. That's what he said at the end of *The Origin of Species*. Indeed, it was in a way in the ensuing decades of the 19th century, in Darwin's private notebooks where he was far less cautious in expressing the implications of his theories. Written even as early as the 1830s, he was particularly focused on interrogating the meaning of words and concepts such as "reason," "will," and "consciousness." These were three words that he singled out as in need of interrogation, these related faculties which had been considered unique, species-defining endowments of the human, which had underpinned humanity's sense of species preeminence in a hierarchically-ordered natural world, within European culture. We're relentlessly challenged by Darwin, who thought that the mind is a function of the body. And I think it is suggested in *La Grande Jatte.*

[musical interlude]

In my book, I talk a lot about the idea of imitation in *La Grande Jatte*. I think, for me, it is ultimately a painting about imitation, imitation and civilization—the imitative impulses of the human species. And I think that's all condensed in the monkey. It's kind of like the punctum, or the navel of the canvas for me. In French, the word aping is *singe*. And, you know, this also has a long history in artistic thinking: art, the ape of nature, that classical aphorism. I think that association of the monkey with art was really changing in the late 19th century.

The monkey is no longer the symbol of mimesis. It becomes the symbol of evolution. And in a way, I see the monkey in *La Grande Jatte* as, in a way, a self-portrait. I mean, it alludes to the tradition of the artist as the ape of nature, and in some way, this monkey *is* Seurat. But at the same time, if the monkey is Seurat, his stand-in, of the artist in that habitual role, it also alludes to the breakdown of that traditional definition of art, because this painting is radically unmoored from classical mimesis. Instead, it's grounded in modern natural science.

Caitlin Woolsey

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