



K. Baedeker, *Northern France*, (Leipzig, 1899)
National Gallery of Art Library, Washington

Painters and Tourists in Normandy

Before about 1750 Europeans were not much interested in the seaside as a place to be — oceans were considered dangerous necessities of commerce and transportation, fishing and war. It was in England that large numbers of people first began to enjoy the beach. So perhaps it is not surprising, given England and Normandy's shared history and proximity, that Normandy welcomed early beach goers in France, and that they were mostly a mix of French and English tourists. As railroads made access easier, a developed tourist infrastructure arose, often backed by English money. Many of the pictures in this section were painted along the English Channel, which forms Normandy's northern limit. Views painted by artists "advertised" Normandy's attractions, and tourists' enjoyment of local sites, in turn, increased demand for landscape painting.



Two of the painters we look at in this section were born in Normandy (Boudin and Monet), but almost every artist represented in this packet worked there: Corot, Rousseau, Millet, Courbet, Daubigny, Manet, Morisot, Renoir, Cézanne, Seurat. Their diversity

provides a chance to investigate several currents: the influence of tourism, the rise of *plein-air* painting, the artistic motivations of Monet's series painting, and the neo-impressionism of Seurat.



Field and pasture in Normandy
Leo J. Kasun

Background: Normandy

Setting

- The Seine, which reaches the English Channel at the port of Le Havre, divides Normandy; the south and west share Brittany's ancient, eroded granites; in the east are limestones and chalks of the Seine Basin.
- Chalky cliffs give eastern Normandy one of the most dramatic coastlines in France; to the west are wide stretches of sand and pebble beaches.
- Inland terrain is largely an open plateau with gentle hills, well suited for small fields, orchards, and pastures.

History

- Normandy was conquered by Julius Caesar in 56 BC and made part of Roman Gaul; its administrative center, Rotomagus, is now called Rouen.
- Beginning in the 8th century, the region suffered devastating raids from Norse marauders; finally in 911 the French king ceded northeastern Normandy to the Norse chief Rollo.
- Norse settlers arrived in large numbers; adopting a new language and culture, they established and gave their name to what became an independent duchy.
- William, duke of Normandy (distant relation of Rollo), invaded England and was victorious at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.
- Norman and English territories were a single political entity, ruled variously by English kings and Norman dukes, until the English crown formally surrendered its claim to Normandy in 1259.
- After the vicissitudes of the Hundred Years War, Normandy was finally secured for France in 1450.
- On June 6, 1944, Allied troops landed in Normandy in one of the major battles of World War II; by August all of northern France had been liberated from Nazi occupation.

Today

- Le Havre, Rouen, and other cities along the Seine are highly industrialized; major industries include petroleum refining, petrochemicals, and automobile manufacture.
- The river is navigable to ocean ships as far as Rouen, an important grain port.
- The southern department of Eure is sometimes called *Paris' 21st arrondissement*; Monet's home in Giverny, like many contemporary Parisians' summer homes, is located there.
- Agriculture remains important in the south and west, where moist air is especially well suited for dairy production and apple and pear orchards.
- Tourism draws millions of visitors annually.
- The population, most centered in urban areas, numbered about 3.2 million in 2004.



Emmanuel-Adolphe Midy | French, 1797–1874
Artists Sketching near a Chateau, 1825
Brush and brown wash over graphite with scraping on wove paper
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National Gallery of Art Library, Washington

Plein-air painting

Open-air painting was already an established tradition by the early nineteenth century. An influential treatise published in 1800 by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (and still read by Pissarro sixty years later) stressed the value of outdoor studies, done quickly and with a broad sweep: “all *études* from Nature should be done within two hours at the outside, and if your effect is sunrise or a sunset, you should take no more than half an hour.”¹ Studies were a vital part of a young painter’s training and a continuing part of his or her preparation. Many artists made regular expeditions to paint in scenic locations, sharpening their eyes and recording effects that could be employed in later compositions. Even at mid-century, however, neither artists nor audiences, and certainly not the official arts establishment, afforded these *plein-air* sketches equal standing with a finished work painted in the studio. Although sketches were exhibited at the Salon, they were always identified as studies.

Several factors helped erode this distinction. In 1841 an American artist had invented collapsible metal tubes for oil paints, which made working outdoors much easier (previously pig bladders were used to store pigments). Later, artist suppliers offered portable paint boxes (*boîtes de campagne*), some with built-in easels and parasols. These innovations coincided with the expansion of railways, which made it much easier to reach the countryside in the first place. The sheer number of people painting outdoors increased. Artists’ colonies grew up in picturesque

locales, many of which would become tourist destinations. By the mid-1800s a new mindset was also at work. Realism, in art and literature, emphasized “truth” and “sincerity” rather than contrived constructions, prompting progressive artists to paint nature with unembellished directness. Bolder painting styles also started to blur the difference between sketches and fully realized studio work.

Many of the artists in this packet were early promoters of *plein-air* painting. Corot’s outdoor sketches were very influential on younger artists (and appealed to avant-garde critics), even though he did not exhibit them publicly. Rousseau made a special easel for working outdoors and many times began his canvases in front of his motif, although he would complete them in the studio. Boudin’s understanding of light and weather effects depended on *plein-air* studies, and he began to paint finished works almost entirely outdoors. In 1864 Daubigny exhibited as a Salon picture a landscape created entirely on the spot. By the 1870s *plein-air* painting had become a touchstone for impressionists, who placed a premium on direct observation, speed, and spontaneity as they tried to capture the look of changing weather, seasons, and times of day.

A “study” vocabulary

French academic practice defined a number of different terms for what we more generally refer to as sketches or studies.

pochade: a very free, rapid sketch

esquisse: a small trial sketch for a planned composition (more defined than a *pochade*)

étude: a preparatory study for a painting (more complete than an *esquisse*), but which could be valued, and was increasingly, as a painting in its own right

ébauche: the initial lay-in of paint on what will be the final canvas

Gastronomie

The cuisine of Normandy is based on cream and butter, and makes great use of apples—more than one hundred varieties are grown. Camembert is the best known of its several cheeses, and one of Normandy's most famous products. Legend holds that the secret for making Camembert was traded in 1790 for shelter by a priest from Brie in the Île-de-France who was hiding from anticlerical measures of the Revolution.

Cider, not wine, is the drink of Normandy, and it comes in a variety of styles and strengths. It is also used to produce Calvados, an apple brandy. Drunk between courses during a long meal, Calvados is called the *trou* (hole) *normand*—leaving a clear palate for the next food. Situated so close to the sea, Normandy naturally also has a strong tradition of seafood.

Tarte Normande à la crème (Normandy Apple and Cream Tart)

10 ½-inch unbaked pastry shell
 4 large Granny Smith or other tart apples,
 peeled, cored, and cut into 1-inch chunks
 2 tbs. unsalted butter, melted
 ⅔ cup sugar
 4 large eggs
 ⅔ cup crème fraîche or heavy cream
 1 tsp. vanilla extract

Toss apples with the melted butter.

Beat together ½ cup of the sugar and the eggs until they are creamy and pale yellow. Add the cream and the vanilla extract and beat until the ingredients are well blended.

Spread the apples evenly over the bottom of the tart shell. Cover with the cream mixture to just below the rim. Sprinkle with remaining sugar.

Bake the tart (use a removable ring pan) on a baking sheet in a preheated 375 degree oven for 35–45 minutes. Apples should be browned and batter set. Cool on a wire rack. Serve warm.

Vocabulaire

bateau à vapeur (m): steam boat

ciel (m): sky

escarpé (m): cliff

falaise (f): bluff

La Manche: the English Channel

marine (f): navy, also seascape

nager: to swim

nuage (m): cloud

plage (f): beach

pomme (f): apple

port (m): harbor

villégiature (f): extended holiday

The Works

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Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
French, 1796–1875

Beach near Etretat, c. 1872
Oil on canvas, 4 7/8 x 10 1/4 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.117



Cliff near Etretat
Leo J. Kasun

This *pochade*, painted outdoors within a few hours, was meant to record Corot's direct impression of the landscape. Its long, sweeping brushstrokes capture in shorthand the look and feel of light and weather, preserving the freshness and immediacy of his initial observation. Corot often made summer expeditions to paint in Normandy. His gentle view of the cliffs near Etretat gives little hint of the dramatic scenery that drew most artists and tourists to the town: two rocky headlands pierced with portals and a dramatic jutting rock called the "Needle."

reproduction
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Eugène Boudin
French, 1824–1898

Jetty and Wharf at Trouville, 1863
Oil on wood, 13 7/8 x 22 3/4 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.9



Eugène Boudin began to paint tourist scenes in 1862; the next year, when this painting was made, a new rail line opened from Paris to Deauville-Trouville, making travel to these resorts much easier. Beach vacationers were unconventional subjects for an artist at that time. Seascapes, if they had figures, were more typically staffed by fishermen or peasant washerwomen. Boudin's tourists, by contrast, were as modern as the black smoke rising from the arriving steamer. They had leisure time and money to spend, and were the patrons as well as the subjects of his art. Though

crowded, Boudin's beach scenes usually lack narrative or anecdote. He was characterizing a class of people, not individuals and, therefore, painted their postures and fashions, not their faces. Their very anonymity added to his pictures' modern feel.

Boudin's modern subjects and, even more, the immediacy of his handling of changing light and sky were a strong influence on younger painters.

Consider this

If you had to sketch *Jetty and Wharf at Trouville* using only two lines, how would you do it?

- *maybe create three horizontal bands*

If you had to reduce the painting to three colors, what would they be? Which color is most difficult to determine?

- *probably the bluish-pinkish-yellowish sky*

Express the painting as a series of ratios: what is the ratio of sky to water to land? Of natural to human elements? Of fixed to ephemeral elements? What do these ratios tell you about the subject—and about what the artist was most interested in?

How does Boudin prevent the human figures from distracting attention from his principal focus, the sky?

- *large proportion of canvas devoted to sky*
- *small scale and lack of detail in figures*
- *vertical elements leading eye upward*
- *bright patches of cloud attracting the eye*

Describe the various activities the figures are engaged in. Are they arriving at or leaving Trouville? What time of day is it? What is the weather like?

What signs of modern life do you see?

- *steamer and smoke*
- *streetlight*
- *tourists*

If this location had been painted fifty years earlier, in what ways would it look different?

- *in place of modern elements, there might be peasant figures, fishermen, nets, boats*

Try to imagine the scene with these changes made—does it convey a different mood and message?

Imagine you are standing on the wharf with the tourists. What might you hear? Feel? Smell? Taste?



This on-the-spot study, although not specifically made for *Jetty and Wharf* (in fact, painted years later), nonetheless illustrates the relation between an oil sketch and a studio-finished picture meant for exhibition at the Salon.

CD 54 | Eugène Boudin

On the Jetty, c. 1869/1870

Oil on wood, 7 ¼ x 10 ¾ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.13

Channel resorts



Claude Monet

Beach at Trouville, 1870

Oil on canvas, 22 x 22 5/8 in.

Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum

Museum of Art 1948.116

During Boudin's lifetime the Channel coast was transformed by tourism. Already in the 1830s some small fishing villages accommodated visitors from France and England. Artists sought the opportunity to paint scenic locales and peasant life, and were soon followed by others in search of the healthful benefits of sea water and air. Bathers, in voluminous clothes to protect against the sun as much as immodesty, did not so much swim as immerse themselves in the water. Ladies were carried out in divans. Actual swimming did not catch on until mid-century or later, when other more competitive activities like rowing and boating also became popular.

Trouville became known as *la reine des plages* (the queen of beaches). By 1850 the former fishing village had become a true resort. The local population was outnumbered during summer season by a factor of five or six to one, and businesses worked to supply tourists with all the amenities they required: large hotels, casinos, theaters, concerts, even perfumed soap for their small dogs. Aristocratic subscribers of private gaming clubs were a powerful draw to prestige-conscious members of the bourgeoisie. The sea itself was now a lesser attraction than this society of leisure and self-display—no wonder Boudin's paintings were so popular. The artist expressed some ambivalence about his customers, once saying they

deserved to see their lives enshrined by art, another time labeling them “gilded parasites.” He went on to clarify his true subject:

Should I confess it? This beach at Trouville, which used to be my delight... seems like a frightful masquerade. One would have to be something of a genius to make something of this bunch of do-nothing poseurs... You feel a certain shame in painting such idle laziness. Fortunately, dear friend, the Creator has spread out everywhere his splendid and warming light, and it is less this society that we reproduce than the element that envelops it.²

Monet and the paintings of Rouen cathedral

Painting in series

In the 1880s many of the artists who had forged impressionism became dissatisfied with its focus on spontaneity and visual perception. Renoir looked to models from the Italian Renaissance, and Pissarro experimented with neo-impressionism. Around 1890 Monet began to explore a single subject systematically, in series: grainstacks, poplar trees, views in Venice and London, a mountain in Norway, and the Rouen cathedral. These paintings were quite different from his impressionist landscapes of the 1870s. Though Monet began them in front of his subject—often working on several canvases simultaneously—he spent long hours reworking them, usually over a couple of years. “The further I go,” he wrote, “the better I see that it takes a great deal of work to succeed in rendering what I want to render: ‘instantaneity,’ above all the *enveloppe*, the same light spread over everything, and I’m more than ever disgusted at things that come easily, at the first attempt.”³

The “*enveloppe*” that attracted Monet was the air itself, the unifying atmosphere between him and his subject. As a younger man Monet had sought to capture the visual effects of light and weather by painting quickly and directly. When asked about his studio, he went so far as to exclaim, “Studio, but I never had one!” and flung his arms wide to embrace the whole out-of-doors. “That,” he said, “is my studio.”⁴ It was not true, of course; even his early impressionist pictures often show signs of having been worked on later in the studio. But now he pursued the most ephemeral effects with deliberate slowness. The relationship between subject and painting evolved as he explored color and light as artistic concerns. Increasingly, he sought internal, pictorial unity, not only in each painting but through each series as a whole. Harmonizing colors and textures allowed him to elaborate his original response to a scene and to explore the effects on mood produced by differing light and color.



Rouen cathedral, 1938

John Rewald Papers, Gallery Archives
National Gallery of Art, Washington

reproduction
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Claude Monet
French, 1840–1926

Rouen Cathedral, West Facade, 1894
Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 25 $\frac{15}{16}$ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.49

In late January or early February 1892, Monet rented rooms across from the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Rouen. He remained until spring and returned to work again the next winter. He painted more than thirty views of the cathedral in all, moving from one canvas to the next as the light and weather changed. Monet took the cathedral paintings back to his home at Giverny (about halfway between Paris and Rouen) and worked on them laboriously in the studio—many made the trip more than once. He wanted to harmonize them as a group, abandoning spontaneity for more careful elaboration that emphasized the subjectivity of his vision. Their heavy layers of paint show him struggling at times. In correspondence he complained about the difficulty, once even calling his pictures “obstinate encrustations of color.”⁵ He finally exhibited twenty of the Rouen views in Paris in 1895.

Rouen had experienced renovations like those made by Baron Haussmann in Paris but kept more of its medieval character. Today, around seven hundred timbered houses still line narrow streets, drawing tourists and scholars of medieval domestic architecture. Even in the nineteenth century, the city invoked images of France and its medieval past. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake here, rallying forces for the Dauphin of France against the English. Monet’s audience would have recognized the cathedral right away. Built over a four-hundred-year period, beginning in the twelfth century, it reflects all the different stages of the French Gothic style. Gothic architecture was invented in France at the abbey church of Saint-Denis just outside Paris, and the style was deeply associated with the nation itself. All these



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Claude Monet
French, 1840–1926

Rouen Cathedral, West Facade, Sunlight, 1894
Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 25 7/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.179



overtone, combined with a Catholic revival during the 1880s, would have made Monet's choice of motif particularly resonant for contemporary French viewers, even if his primary motivation remained an exploration of color and mood.

Consider this

Monet painted more than thirty scenes of Rouen cathedral. Suggest some environmental conditions that might have been seen in other paintings in the series. Why were serial paintings well suited for Monet's exploration of the changing effects of light, weather, and atmosphere?

Monet struggled to render the unifying atmosphere that bathed a scene, which he called its *enveloppe*. Can you describe this painting's *enveloppe* in words?

Do you see any clear outlines? Is it possible to determine exactly where one surface ends and another begins? If line does not define the forms in this painting, what does?

□ *color*

Monet spent long hours in his studio reworking these canvases he had begun under direct observation. How did this procedure differ from the original outdoor technique of the impressionists?

reproduction
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Georges Seurat
French, 1859–1891

The Lighthouse at Honfleur, 1886
Oil on canvas, 26 ¼ x 32 ¼ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.33



Between 1885 and 1890 Georges Seurat traveled to Normandy every summer but one, staying many weeks in different locations to paint along the coast. He was continuing a tradition of Seurat family vacations but also consciously positioning himself in the long line of artists who had painted there before him.

In 1886 he was in Honfleur. Once an important port, it had been overtaken by Le Havre on the other side of the Seine estuary. Seurat returned from his stay there with six canvases, including this one. Seeing this and other views of the Normandy coast in the final impressionist exhibition in 1888, a contemporary reviewer was moved to describe the “calm immensity”⁶ of Seurat’s seascapes. In the right foreground, a boat cradle and abandoned wheel invoke the lives of Honfleur’s retired sailors living in the hospice behind. The dark building’s walls are dabbed with horizontal bits of red and orange, purple and blue, even green. In the roof a different balance of these colors gives the appearance of slate, slicked with salt air. In practice the small touches of paint are too large to achieve the true optical mixing that neo-impressionists like Seurat sought, but the complementary colors produce a shimmering effect.



Hospital and lighthouse at Honfleur, 1950s

John Rewald Papers, National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Gallery Archives.

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Georges Seurat
French, 1859–1891

Seascape at Port-en-Bessin, Normandy, 1888
Oil on canvas, 25 5/8 x 31 7/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in
memory of Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.21

Consider this

What mood or emotion does *Lighthouse at Honfleur* convey to you? Suggest five adjectives to describe it.

The dark criss-crossing lines of the boat cradle in the foreground make a strong impression against their pale surroundings. Why do you think Seurat gave so much emphasis to this object?

- try covering it with an appropriately colored piece of paper to appreciate its anchoring effect
- observe how the composition is underpinned by a similar convergence of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines

The painting contains many signs of human activity, such as the lighthouse, rowboat, hospice building, and wheel—but no people. Why do you think they were excluded? How does the lack of figures affect our experience of the painting? Do you see anything that suggests movement, sound, or passing time?

What color is the roof of the hospice?
What colors were used to create that appearance?



Six paintings resulted from Seurat's six-week stay in Port-en-Bessin in 1888. It was a small fishing port, nestled between opposing cliffs cut by the river Dromme. Seurat chose to paint the normal life of the little harbor and straightforward views of the coastline—a choice that differed from most painters'. He preferred a quiet landscape, like this one, to dramatic views of cliffs or crashing waves. And, with few exceptions, he avoided either picturesque or overtly modern scenes, ignoring both Port-en-Bessin's medieval stone tower and the many tourists he must have encountered hiking the same cliff trails.

Seurat's brushstrokes are more uniform in this painting than in *The Lighthouse at Honfleur*, which he made only two years earlier. More often following the contours of the forms they define, the brushstrokes make us more aware of Seurat's presence

as artist. He believed art to be a transformation (not imitation) of nature accomplished through the artist's imagination and intellect. The small touches of complementary colors continue around the painted border of the canvas, making the image "pop."

Seurat's ideas about composition were influenced by Charles Henry's *L'Esthétique scientifique*, published in 1855, which went so far as to include what Henry called an "aesthetic protractor." Seurat came to believe that mood was determined by three factors: tone, tint, and line. Sadness, for instance, was created by descending contours and cool colors, like those in this painting. The land, shaded by blues and greens, steps down in a large triangle that dominates the canvas. Gray clouds dampen the blonder tones of the sky below.

Neo-impressionism

Seurat's style was dubbed "neo-impressionist" by a sympathetic critic, but the artist himself preferred the terms "divisionism" or "*chromo-luminisme*." "Pointillism" describes the technique of applying paint in small dots (*points*), which had existed before Seurat adopted the practice. Neo-impressionism was no simple technique but an attempt to systematize all aspects of painting. Seurat laid out his ideas in a letter written in 1890, which he illustrated with small sketches:

Aesthetic

*Art is Harmony. Harmony is the analogy of contrary and similar qualities in **tone**, **color**, and **line**, considered with reference to a dominant and under the influence of a scheme of lighting in gay, calm, or sad combinations.*

The contraries are:

*In **tone**, a more luminous against a darker.*

*In **color**, the complementaries; that is, a particular red set against its complementary, etc. — red-green/orange-blue/yellow-violet.*

*In **line**, those that form a right angle.*

***Gaiety of tone** results from a luminous dominant; of **color**, from a warm dominant; of **line**, from angles above the horizontal.*



***Calmness of tone** results from a balance of dark and light; of **color**, from a balance of warm and cold; of **line**, from a horizontal.*

***Sadness of tone** results from a dark dominant; of **color**, from a cold dominant; of **line**, from angles below the horizontal.*



Technical

Assuming the phenomena of the duration of a light-impression on the retina.

Synthesis necessarily follows. The means of expression is the optical mixture of tones and colors (local color and the color of the source of illumination: sunlight, lamplight, gaslight, etc.), in accordance with the law of contrast, gradation, and irradiation.

The frame is in a harmony that opposes those of the tones, colors, and lines of the picture.⁷



Color and light

Seurat's technique was informed by new understanding of the relation between color and light. Artists had long known that pigments of red, yellow, and blue mixed to form all the other colors. Yellow mixed with blue produces green, for example. This is a subtractive process, each pigment absorbing and reflecting different wavelengths of light. The neo-impressionists' small touches of color, however, were meant to work by an additive process, acting directly as color-

light wavelengths on the eye and brain. These paints—a whole range of them, applied straight out of the tube—were blended in the viewer's perception, not on the palette. Physicists Hermann von Helmholtz and James Clerk Maxwell had demonstrated, using rapidly spinning disks with varicolored segments, that colored light did, in fact, mix optically: spinning red and green disks produced the sensation of yellow; red and blue, purple; blue and

yellow, white. An American, Ogden Rood, professor of physics at Columbia University and amateur watercolor painter, made these discoveries accessible in his *Modern Chromatics*, published in French in 1879. Rood urged artists to "paint with light." No artist made a more serious attempt than Seurat.

The Artists

Eugène Boudin

French, 1824–1898



Eugène Boudin at Deauville-Trouville,
June 1896

Honfleur, Musée Eugène Boudin

Eugène Boudin was born and died in Normandy. His father was a sailor on one of the first steamships that ran between Le Havre and Honfleur. Boudin worked as cabin boy on his father's ship, observing from an early age the ever-changing sea and sky that would become his primary focus as a painter. In 1836, at age twelve, he began to work in a stationery and frame shop. The owner gave him a box of paints, but little else is known about his early interest in art. At twenty he opened his own business, framing and selling the works of visiting artists. In 1847 Boudin sold the shop to pay his way out of military service. Sponsored by his former artist-clients, he went to Paris to study and copy in the Louvre. In 1851 the town of Le Havre awarded him a three-year scholarship.

Boudin quickly established the pattern he would follow throughout his career: in summer he traveled to paint outdoor sketches that he would complete in his Paris studio over the winter. He went mostly to Normandy and Brittany, and other parts of the Channel coast. (Near the end of his life, illness took him to the French Riviera; he liked the sunny warmth, his letters suggest, but still preferred the cool, windy north.) Though he painted inland landscapes, peasant scenes, and still lifes, it was the coast, especially its river estuaries and harbors, that most attracted Boudin's eye. In 1862 he started painting the droves of fashionable tourists who vacationed at Normandy beach resorts. These pictures—his best known—were highly marketable and number in the thousands.

In the 1860s Boudin did not yet consider his outdoor studies fully finished; he felt they should be “pushed,” as he said, to completion using notes, sketches, and memory. He meticulously recorded details about atmosphere, weather, and times of day (and inscribed this information on his canvases). He wrote to a student: “An impression is gained in an instant, but it then has to be condensed following the rules of art or rather your own feeling and that is the most difficult thing—to finish a painting without spoiling anything.”⁸ At the same time, Boudin also claimed “everything that is painted directly and on the spot has always a strength, a power, a vivacity of touch which one cannot recover in the studio.” Eventually Boudin would paint almost entirely *en plein air*, saying that one brushstroke placed outdoors was of more value than two days spent in the studio. His work foreshadowed impressionist concerns with atmosphere and the changing effects of weather and light. Daubigny called him “the king of the skies.” The direct freshness of his works was a particular influence for Monet, who as a teenager worked alongside Boudin. As the modest Boudin himself wrote: “I may well have had some small measure of influence on the movement that led painters to study actual daylight and express the changing aspects of the sky with the utmost sincerity.”

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
biography, p. 46

Claude Monet
biography, p. 68

Georges Seurat

(French, 1859–1891)



Ernest J. Laurent | French, 1859–1929

Portrait of Georges Seurat, 1883 | Black chalk,
15 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.

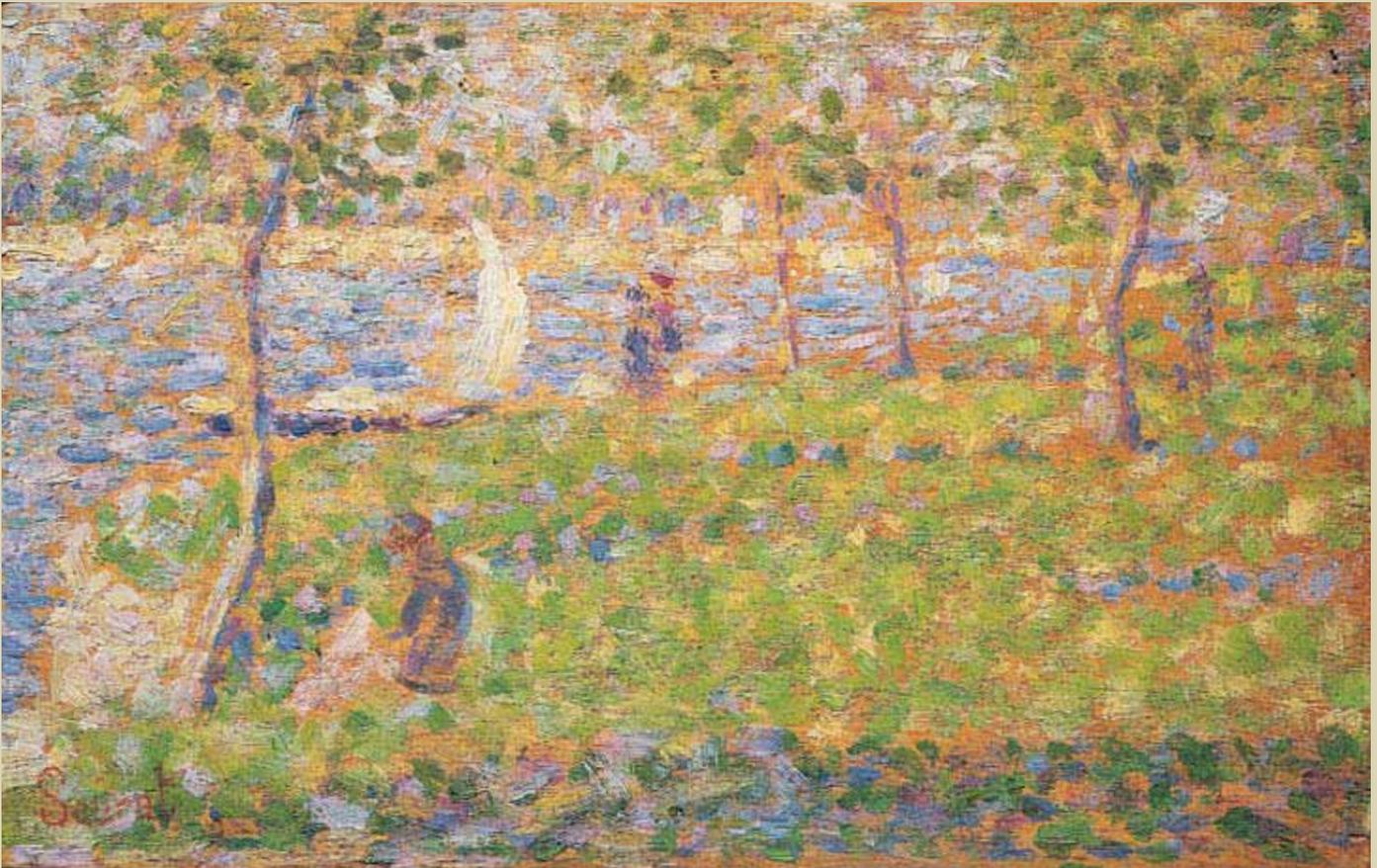
Paris, Musée du Louvre/Art Resource, NY

Georges Seurat was born in Paris to a middle-class family. His father had worked as a coachman but retired with a substantial income from real estate. Seurat began drawing as a boy and was enrolled in formal lessons by age sixteen. Three years later he was accepted at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Seurat's artistic training followed a traditional academic course. He was attracted by neo-classical painters like J. A. D. Ingres and the airless monumentality of early Renaissance frescoes. He read theoretical studies about the expressive value of color and line, distinctions between local and reflected color, the operation of color complements, and the idea that colors could be mixed optically in the eye. (See the Glossary for information about color terms.) Seurat studied at the *École* for about eighteen months but did not return following a short period of military service in 1879. Instead he started working independently.

Still in 1879 Seurat visited the fourth impressionist exhibition, which a friend described as producing “an unexpected and profound shock.” He turned from the heroic nudes and mythological figures of his student work to modern subjects in the city, suburbs, and countryside. He was interested in the impressionists' bright palette and broken brushwork but began to systematize their intuitive and empirical approach. Despite depicting modern life, Seurat shunned quick snapshotlike views for carefully planned compositions that were monumental and timeless. He eliminated all that was accidental, thereby underscoring their classical feel. A contemporary likened his figures to those of ancient Greek art, saying Seurat's ambition was to “make the moderns pass by... in their essential aspect like figures on a Panathenaic frieze.”⁹

Between 1881 and 1883, Seurat continued to read about optics and color, and aesthetic theories linking formal elements of color and composition with emotion and mood. He applied these lessons in small painted panels (previously he had mostly drawn), initially using a hatchwork of small brushstrokes (*balayé*), and then a more rigorous system of small dots (*points*). In pairing small dabs of color in complementary pairs, his goal was not simply to produce a blended hue in the eye but—because this technique mixes colored light, not pigment—to enhance the luminosity of his paintings. Seurat applied a similar systematic approach to composition, aligning certain types of line and color with particular moods. His neo-impressionist “rules,” however, did not produce cold or mechanistic results; instead Seurat's paintings are highly personal and resonant, and were greatly admired by symbolist writers and poets.

Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884* became the most famous painting of the decade (and among the works most often reproduced in commercial art today). It created a sensation when it was shown at the final impressionist exhibition in the spring of 1886 and, overnight, made Seurat leader of a new avant-garde. His leadership was short-lived, however. He quarreled with other neo-impressionists, and in 1889 was challenged by the synthetism of Gauguin. He died of diphtheria only a few years later at age thirty-one.



Between May and December 1884 Seurat made numerous preparatory drawings and painted studies for *La Grande Jatte*, including this one.

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Study for "La Grande Jatte," 1884/1885

Oil on wood, 6 ¼ x 9 7/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.81