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Valiant, Independent, and Harmonious: Paul Signac and Neo-Impressionism after 1900*

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Abstract

Through a close reading of Parisian art criticism around 1900, this essay examines Paul Signac's role as de facto head of the neo-impressionists and guiding spirit of the *Salon des Indépendants*. Signac, and the neo-impressionists generally, had suffered from the decline of the *Indépendants* in the latter 1890s, but the resurgence of both group and *Salon* in 1901 positioned Signac as one of the most significant avant-garde artists in the early 20th century, where he played a vital role in the most significant art debates then animating Paris. Their return to prominence was due in no small measure to Signac's latest foray into the decorative, a highly charged arena that would be central to the artistic debates of the first decade of the 20th century.

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*Paul Signac ... neo-impressionists ...
Independents ... It is difficult to speak of one
without evoking the others.*

Henri Guilbeaux, 1911¹

Introduction

[1] In March of 1904, the death of Paul Signac (1863-1935) was erroneously reported in the Parisian press.² While this error was quickly corrected, more than a century later Signac's reputation has continued to suffer. His role in the development of many 20th century artists' work has often been noted, only to be rhetorically eradicated. The widespread interest in neo-impressionism by a generation of artists coming to age after 1900 has been most often explained as a combination of factors which minimize the art of Signac and the other living neo-impressionists. Most often, the interest is explained away as a delayed reaction to Signac's 1898 text *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-*

* I would like to thank Regina Wenninger and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments, as well as Tania Woloshyn, for her enthusiastic interest in the neo-impressionists, her insightful comments, and with Anthea Callen her organizing of the "New Directions in Neo-Impressionism" conference for which this paper was originally written. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

¹ Henri Guilbeaux, "Paul Signac et les Indépendants," in: *Les Hommes du Jour* (22 Apr. 1911), unpaginated.

² Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, "Chronologie," in: Françoise Cachin with Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint*, Paris 2000, 343-399, here 374. The mistake was because of the very similar name of the recently deceased but little known artist Paul Seignac.

impressionnisme, as if his paintings were of negligible significance.³ It is also often explained almost apologetically, as if younger artists had no where else to look, because of the lack of major artists then in Paris.⁴ Despite some important recent re-evaluations of late neo-impressionism, secondary literature – including even such significant contributions to our understanding of the movement as the exhibition catalogue, *Le néo-impressionnisme de Seurat à Paul Klee* – often negatively characterizes Signac and late neo-impressionism's importance in various ways. It remains all too common to see neo-impressionism in the 20th century through the lens of Georges Seurat's (1859-1891) work. Yet even those well versed in later neo-impressionism sometimes undercut the movement's significance. Françoise Cachin, for example, described the widespread interest in the 20th century as both an epidemic and a fever,⁵ suggesting how prevalent the interest was, but also implying that it was infectious and needed to be overcome. The impact of neo-impressionism, it has been so often argued, was "relatively brief,"⁶ merely "a way station on the trip to other destinations,"⁷ or a stricture, which artists had to "free themselves from."⁸ This rhetoric has admitted and then immediately minimized the significance of both Signac and neo-impressionism in the early 20th century.

[2] This essay, through a close reading of Parisian art criticism around 1900, reveals a very different narrative. Despite reports of his death in the Parisian press in the years leading up to 1904, Signac was a leading artist. His role as de facto head of the neo-impressionists and, at the same time, guiding spirit of the *Salon de la Société des Indépendants* (hereafter Independents) positioned him as much more than a follower of Seurat. Beginning in 1901, the neo-impressionists, generally, and Signac, in particular, were highly regarded. Their success closely mirrored the perceived value of the Independents from 1898-1906. I argue that in the opening years of the 20th century, the

³ Much of the interest in neo-impressionism in the twentieth century arises out of research on Matisse for which Catherine Bock's ground-breaking book *Henri Matisse and neo-impressionism, 1898-1908*, Ann Arbor 1981, has been instrumental; the opening sentence of her text highlights the importance of Signac's text for Matisse and many other young artists, and, throughout, her account remains balanced. More recently, Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon has given Signac's text as the explanation of neo-impressionism's "second souffle" in the twentieth century, while suggesting artists in the school of Signac were of minor importance: "Le néo-impressionnisme (1884-1898)," in: *Le néo-impressionnisme de Seurat à Paul Klee*, exh. cat., Paris 2005, 14-25, here 25. Cachin, *Signac*, 64, similarly attributes greater influence to Signac's text than his works.

⁴ Cachin, "Néo-impressionnisme et fauvisme," in: *Le néo-impressionnisme de Seurat à Paul Klee*, 83-93, here 83, also sees a dearth of significant artists in the early twentieth century arguing that for young artists "En France, les toutes premières années du siècle ont été marquées par une absence d'enseignement théorique et de modèles." She goes on to note that most major nineteenth century figures had died, and the two most relevant, Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin were absent from Paris.

⁵ Cachin, "Néo-impressionnisme et fauvisme," 83: "une sorte d'épidémie de touches de couleur pure"; and 90: "Nous ne ferons pas ici la liste exhaustive de tous les artistes qui, avant le cubisme, l'orphisme ou l'abstraction, eurent [...] une petite fièvre pointilliste."

⁶ Cachin, "Néo-impressionnisme et fauvisme," 83.

⁷ John Leighton, "Out of Seurat's Shadow: Signac, 1863-1935, An Introduction," in: Anne Distel et al., eds., *Signac, 1863-1935*, exh. cat., New York 2001, 3-21, here 20.

⁸ Cachin, "Néo-impressionnisme et fauvisme," 83.

neo-impressionist movement played a vital role in the most significant art debates then animating Paris. Despite a period in the later 1890s when the significance of both the neo-impressionists and the Independents waned, the resurgence of both in the early years of the 20th century has not been fully explored. Their twinned resurgence in 1901 was due in no small measure to Signac's latest foray into the decorative, a highly charged arena that would be central to the artistic debates of the first decade of the 20th century.

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The Independents and Neo-Impressionists in the 1890s

[3] From its founding in 1884, the Independents was closely tied to neo-impressionism, and the fortunes of the inter-related groups would rise and fall together.⁹ Like the *Salon des Refusés* before it, the group arose in response to the repressive juries of the official Salon of the *Société des artistes français*.¹⁰ The neo-impressionist Albert Dubois-Pillet (1846-1890) was instrumental to the founding of the society, and acted as its first president until his death in 1890. The Independents took as its founding principles the suppression of an admission jury, making its annual exhibition open to any who paid the small membership fee. From the outset, the principles of the Independents were recognized (and sometimes applauded) for their anarchist political corollary, which most members of the neo-impressionist movement shared, as Robyn Roslak has ably shown.¹¹ The adhesion to the society of such major figures of the latter 1880s, such as Georges Seurat, Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), Odilon Redon (1840-1916), and the artists who came to be known as the Nabis, guaranteed a certain notoriety; but, as with the *Refusés*, individual works were often overwhelmed in the massive show. Indeed, despite its importance, even as early as 1889 the German press had stopped reviewing the Independents.¹² Throughout the 1880s it was the most avant-garde, but also the unruliest, of the annual Salons.

[4] Multiple factors led to its decline in the 1890s. First, the founding and immediate success of the *Salon nationale des beaux-arts* (hereafter National) in 1890 set the stage for the Independents' loss of direction. Their position as the alternative to the conservative *Société des artistes français* was usurped by the National, which firmly entrenched itself in the middle with a calculated appeal to the middle class consumer.¹³ Many artists who had shown with the Independents in the 1880s switched to the National

⁹ Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, Chicago 1996, 193. See also Dominique Lobstein, "Néo-impressionnistes et Indépendants," in: *Le Néo-impressionnisme de Seurat à Paul Klee*, 54-61.

¹⁰ See Lobstein, "Néo-impressionnistes et Indépendants," 55-56.

¹¹ Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, Aldershot 2007, 42.

¹² Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Princeton 1994, 135.

¹³ Marie J. Aquilino, "The Decorating Campaigns at the Salon du Champ-de-Mars and the Salon des Champs-Élysées in the 1890s," in: *Art Journal* 48 (1989), 78-84.

in the following decade. If this new competition did not devastate the exhibiting society, it mounted a significant challenge. More challenging still was the loss in quick succession of three of the leading independent artists of the day: Van Gogh (d.1890); Dubois-Pillet (d.1890), who was given a large memorial retrospective; and, most significantly, the devastating and sudden death of Georges Seurat after the exhibition's opening, in 1891 (see [Marnin Young's paper](#) in this Special Issue).¹⁴

[5] Throughout the 1890s, reviews of the Independent's annual show in the Parisian press became increasingly brief, infrequent, and often negative. As Martha Ward has shown, avant-garde groups including the neo-impressionists shifted towards commercial venues in that decade.¹⁵ After 1895, when Signac exhibited his poorly received *Au temps d'harmonie*, "the force of neo-impressionism as a movement and the appeal of the independents as an exhibition venue seem to have declined loosely in tandem."¹⁶ Few Parisian journals bothered to review the 1897 *Salon des Indépendants* at all. André Fontainas could write in the *Mercure de France* that "The salon of the Independents [...] reveals itself to be more and more sterile every year. Nothing, nothing, and nothing! [...] Why M. Signac? Why M. Luce?"¹⁷ *La Plume*, which had been generally sympathetic to the neo-impressionists and the Independents, included a slightly longer review in which Yvanhoé Rambosson trotted out the well-rehearsed complaints about pointillism as a theory spoiling the work of fine artists. He expressed his relief about its supposed demise: "Very happily the sacred battalion has only these 2 combatants."¹⁸ Rambosson's use of the military metaphor, typical of much commentary on neo-impressionism, is undoubtedly a veiled reference to their political ties to the anarchist movement, which had also been an important component of the Independents, and was also suffering serious decline. The anarchist *attentats*, the assassination of President Sadi Carnot, the government's press and artistic censorship and crackdown on anarchist public assemblies, and the consequent Trial of the Thirty all dimmed the attractions of the movement in the mid-1890s.¹⁹ When Rambosson concluded, "There is nothing remarkable in this Salon. The beautiful days of the Independents have passed," his

¹⁴ Gustave Geffroy, "Les Indépendants," in: *La Vie Artistique* (1892), 306-312, here 306.

¹⁵ On the long association between the neo-impressionists and the Independents, see Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, 55.

¹⁶ Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, 193.

¹⁷ André Fontainas, "Art," in: *Mercure de France* 22, no. 89 (May 1897), 411-413, here 412: "Le Salon des Indépendants [...] se manifeste de plus en plus stérile, chaque année. Rien, rien et rien! [...] pourquoi M. Signac? pourquoi M. Luce?"

¹⁸ Yvanhoé Rambosson, "Le Salon des Indépendants," in: *La Plume* (1897), 311-313, here 312: "Fort heureusement le bataillon sacré ne compte plus que ces deux combatants."

¹⁹ On anarchism, see Jean Maitron, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France*, vol.1, *Des origines à 1914*, Paris 1975; on its relation to neo-impressionism see Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 173-174.

comments likely seemed to apply equally to the Independents, the neo-impressionists, and anarchism itself.²⁰

[6] In these same years, neo-impressionist painters began to experiment with a larger touch, resulting in more brilliantly colored canvases, and more individualistic results. In the early 1890s, Signac and his friend and fellow neo-impressionist, Henri-Edmond Cross (1856-1910), both relocated to small towns in Provence. Their subject matter increasingly became France's Mediterranean coast, beautifully rendered, and meant to suggest by both form and content the harmonious society envisioned in the anarchist future.²¹ Later in the decade, Signac wrote and published *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme*, an important history of color and explanation of neo-impressionist technique. The text was first published in installments in *La Revue Blanche* in the spring of 1898, and in book format from the press *Éditions de la Revue Blanche* in 1899.²² Despite the fact that the text is often used to explain neo-impressionism's popularity in the first years of the 20th century, response even in 1898-1899 was mixed at best. André Fontainas, writing in 1899 for *Mercur de France*, praised Signac's "excellent" history, but was not won over to the style; he concluded "but, in matters of art, it is the considered view of the art that can persuade." He disparaged Cross's work, in which "the air no longer circulates," and Maximilien Luce's (1858-1941), which he said had "the chill of an overly methodical glance."²³ Indeed, even the faint praise for Signac's technique was further muted, since Fontainas said that it was only when the technique was used "with discretion" that he was willing to concede any success to neo-impressionist canvases.

[7] Despite the publication of Signac's text, the Independents hit low points in 1899 and 1900. Space constraints, due to preparations for the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*, caused their annual shows during these years to be held late in the fall and at a poor venue.²⁴ In 1899, the number of exhibiting artists fell sharply to 187, down from more than 1000 as late as 1897. Even the most loyal neo-impressionists were ambivalent about the exhibition that year: despite his gentle chiding of Théo Van Rysselberghe

²⁰ Rambosson, "Art," 313: "il n'y a dans ce Salon rien de remarquable. Les beaux jours des Indépendants sont passés."

²¹ On Cross, see Tania Woloshyn, "Aesthetic and Therapeutic Imprints: Artists and Invalids on the Côte d'Azur, ca. 1890-1910," in: *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 11 (2012), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring12/aesthetic-and-therapeutic-imprints-artists-and-invalids-on-the-cote-dazur-c-18901910> (accessed 15 Apr. 2012).

²² It would be reprinted in Paris in 1911; see Ferretti-Bocquillon, "Chronologie," 370-371; and Marina Ferretti-Boquillon, "Ports and Travels: Paul Signac in the Twentieth Century," in: *Signac, 1863-1935*, 224 which also describes the text's success in Belgium and Germany.

²³ André Fontainas, "Art Moderne," in: *Mercur de France* 30, no. 112 (Apr. 1899), 247-252, here 250: "Mais, en matière d'art, ce qui peut convaincre c'est la vue raisonnée des œuvres," and 251: "l'air ne circule plus"; "la froideur d'un coup d'oeil trop méthodique."

²⁴ It was at the Hôtel de Poilly, 5, rue du Colisée: Félicien Fagus (pseud Georges Faillet), "XVe Exposition des artistes Indépendants (1)," in: *La Revue Blanche* 20 (1899), 387-388, here 387; also described by Henry Eon, "Expositions: Les Indépendants – Lachenal," in: *La Plume* (1899), 751-752, here 751.

(1862-1926) for not supporting the Independents in the latter 1890s,²⁵ Signac himself sent only two works in 1899. Cross accurately assessed the situation: "This exhibition has no importance due to the small number of works and the poor location. I believe that it was our duty to send something: it was simply for that reason that I did it."²⁶ In 1899, journals like *La Plume* and *Mercure de France* wrote what read as elegies for the Independents: Fontainas devoted a single paragraph to the show, which he described as more than half dead, and as having had its revolutionary hour.²⁷ In 1900, the Independents reached its nadir, with only 55 exhibitors and a dearth of reviews.²⁸

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The Turning Point: 1901

[8] Yet reports of the Independents' imminent death were mistaken. Response to both the Independents and neo-impressionist works in 1901 were decidedly – even shockingly – positive.²⁹ The *Mercure de France*, which had sung the society's death knell, and *La Plume*, which had not bothered to review the 1900 exhibition, devoted long articles in 1901 to the phoenix-like Salon. In *Mercure de France*, Emile Verhaeren's article enthusiastically exclaimed: "The Independants! They are alive and have abandoned none of their daring."³⁰ Critics agreed that the 1901 show was "one of the most brilliant exhibitions" in the group's 17-year history.³¹ Partial explanation for this turnaround must be given to the exhibition's timing: their return to the spring season better fitted established conventions. The new location, in the Grand Palais, was also beneficial. Gustave Coquiôt stated "The site is magnificently chosen," and "We are pleased that it has finally become the right home for the Société des Indépendants."³² Cross reported the exhibition's success to Angrand:

It is going well! That's to say that the number of visitors to the Independents has maintained itself until now – an average which varies from 150 to 180; slightly lower numbers began to be evident for the last three days – yesterday 140. But the important thing is that, in view of the next show, our funds will be sufficient

²⁵ Undated letter from Signac to van Rysselberghe, Getty Archives, 870355 (4).

²⁶ Quoted in translation in Bock, *Henri Matisse and Neo-Impressionism*, 136.

²⁷ Fontainas, "Art Moderne," in: *Mercure de France* 32, no. 120 (Dec. 1899), 811-817, here 816.

²⁸ Although the numbers do not tell the whole story, they are revealing. Before 1890, their annual exhibit had no more than 170 exhibitors; 1891-1898 the number of exhibitors ranged from 198 to 312; but in 1899 the number fell back to 187; and 1900 fell to only 55. The numbers of exhibitors rebounded to 162 in 1901, when it secured a better location, and they expanded rapidly reaching 1320 in 1908 and remained high until the First World War.

²⁹ Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 135, briefly discusses its resurgence.

³⁰ Emile Verhaeren, "Les Salons," in: *Mercure de France* 38 (June 1901), 673-692, here 687: "Les indépendants! Ils vivent et n'ont rien abandonné de leurs audaces."

³¹ B. Guinaudeau, "Le Salon des Indépendants," in: *L'Aurore* (13 May 1901), 1.

³² Gustave Coquiôt, "Les Indépendants," in: *Gil Blas* (20 Apr. 1901), 1-2, here 1: "Le lieu est magnifiquement choisi," and "nous sommes heureux qu'elle soit enfin devenue le bon gîte pour la Société des Indépendants."

and – that is the case. The quality of the visitors is not mediocre and, which is not always seen in our society, much was sold.³³

[9] The majority of reviews of the annual show began by referencing in some way the exhibition's history. Some situated it as having evolved out of the notorious 1863 Salon des Refusés, thus relying on that old trope used to explain unpopular art by comparing it to older works unappreciated in its time but belatedly recognized as of the highest quality.³⁴ Reviews generally agreed that the exhibiting society had proven its worth and triumphed over its naysayers. Most noted the Society's distinctive and revolutionary principle of open admission, "neither jury, nor awards," some even directly quoting motto of the principles at length.³⁵ This call to principles had been common enough in the 1880s, but was far less prevalent in the latter 1890s. Indeed, when the principles had been invoked in the late 1890s, they were often given as the explanation for the failure of the exhibition, rather than its success, as was the case in 1899 when Henry Eon complained: "Independence understood in this way is anarchy and it leads to nothing; it becomes, in fact, the paralysis of all carefully thought out effort."³⁶ Yet, increasingly, after the turn of the century, critics would praise this governing artistic principle precisely for its political corollary, which had often gone unremarked in the restrictive days after 1894.³⁷ Michel Puy, for example, began by praising the *Salon des Indépendants* for its "spirit of critique" and "assault on the established order," which "worries the good citizens," concluding that all art searching for the new signifies "emancipation."³⁸ Laertes, in *La Dépêche*, explained that, "The Independents live under the regime of absolute freedom and equality."³⁹ Emile Sedeyn made the positive association between artistic independence and political independence even clearer:

The idea of independence enhances human dignity. He who knows how to be honest without fearing the police, to be fair without fear of purgatory, to be a painter without fearing the approval of the official jury and without begging for honors from the Institute, it is he who affirms the beauty of independence.⁴⁰

³³ Cross to Angrand, as quoted and translated in Bock, *Henri Matisse*, 136, note 41.

³⁴ Coquiote, "Les Indépendants," 1.

³⁵ As a sample, see Verhaeren, "Les Salons," 687; Coquiote, "Les Indépendants," 1; Emile Sedeyn, "Les Artistes Indépendants," in: *La Critique* 7, no. 149 (5 May 1901), 69-70, here 69; Michel Puy, "Les Indépendants," in: *Le Messidor* 1, no. 6 (June 1901), 209-214, here 209; and Roger Marx, "La Saison d'art," in: *Revue universelle* (1901), 649-652, here 652.

³⁶ Henry Eon, "Expositions: Les Indépendants – Lachenal," 751: "L'indépendance ainsi comprise, c'est l'anarchie, et cela ne mène à rien; cela deviant, en effet, la paralysie de tout effort raisonné." See also Henry Eon, "Salon des Indépendants," in: *La Plume* (1896), 263-4.

³⁷ On the Trial of Thirty, see Maitron, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France*, 251-261.

³⁸ Puy, "Les Indépendants," here 209-210: "J'insisterai d'autant plus sur le Salon des Indépendants que, par les tendances qu'il manifeste, labeur, esprit de critique et d'analyse, effort jamais découragé, il apparaît comme attentatoire à l'ordre établi. La clairvoyance des bons citoyens s'en inquiète [...] Un art qui recherche du nouveau ne signifie-t-il pas: émancipation?"

³⁹ Laertes, "Le Salon des Indépendants," in: *La Dépêche* 32, no. 11, 927 (24 Apr. 1901), 1: "Les Indépendants vivent sous le régime de la liberté et de l'égalité plénières."

[10] Such positive assessments of the *Société's* principles, both artistic and political, reveal a marked shift from responses dating to the latter 1890s, and make clear that 1901 was a decisive turning point for the Independents.

[11] Undoubtedly part of the resurgence was due to artists outside the neo-impressionist circle. Cézanne, who had begun showing with the Independents in 1899, continued to exhibit there in 1901 and 1902⁴¹; his rising status brought much luster. Discussions of the individual artists at the 1901 exhibition most often began with him, "the most renowned landscapist of this time."⁴² The next discussed group was the neo-impressionists, closely followed by the Nabis, Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940), Pierre Bonnard (1867-1946) and Maurice Denis (1870-1943), who had abandoned the Independents in previous years for the *Salon de la Société nationale des beaux-arts*. They returned in 1901, in part because the National had taken a more conservative turn. André Fontainas in *La Plume* noted that many painters of talent showed at both the Independents and the National. He pondered why their works looked different in the different venues: "Strange thing. Is it due to the more pleasant atmosphere? Is it the selection of the official juries that restrained them? The paintings shown at the Independents better reveal, in general, a free temperament, an ease of style, their own beauty."⁴³ The Independents was being attributed new powers. While the presence of so many significant artists does much to explain the resurgence of the Independents, it does not explain the praise newly heaped on the Signac and the other neo-impressionists.

[12] If critics did not launch their reviews with Cézanne, most began either by discussing the posthumous retrospective given to the recently discovered painter, Edmond Le Marcis (1829-1900), or by describing the works of Signac and the other neo-impressionists.⁴⁴ The order of discussion clearly indicated status. The neo-impressionists as a group received increasing critical attention and concomitant space in reviews, even as their technique took less. As their consistent supporter Emile Verhaeren explained, neo-impressionism's "technique is no longer discussed as a challenge or childish behaviour; it has slowly taken its place in the world of art and those who use it, at least

⁴⁰ Sedeyn, "Les Artistes Indépendants," 69-70: "L'idée d'indépendance rehausse la dignité humaine. Celui qui sait être honnête sans craindre les gendarmes, être juste sans craindre le purgatoire, être peintre sans craindre les suffrages du jury officiel et sans quémander des honneurs à l'Institut, celui-là affirme la beauté de l'indépendance."

⁴¹ Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 135 and 310, note 98, who further notes that Cézanne left the Independents for the Salon d'Automne in 1904 where he was given his own room with 31 works.

⁴² Coquiot, "Les Indépendants," 1901, 1: "le plus illustre paysagiste de ce temps."

⁴³ Fontainas, "Les Artistes Indépendants," in: *La Plume* (1901), 352 -355, here 352: "Chose étrange, est-ce dû à l'atmosphère plus sympathique? est-ce le choix des jurys officiels les y a contraints? les toiles mises aux Indépendants, révèlent mieux, en general, un tempérament libre, une aisance de style, leur beauté propre."

⁴⁴ The reverence with which Cézanne is treated in these reviews is also notable.

some of them, are in the process of asserting their mastery."⁴⁵ While a few critics continued to discuss the perceived limits of the divisionist technique in 1901, far more devoted significant space to praising the group and Signac in particular. Coquiote identified him as "the soul of the this admirable Society."⁴⁶ In *L'Encyclopédie Contemporaine*, Ivan barely mentioned the technique in passing, as he described Signac as "the well-known pointillist," before going on to heap lavish praise on all the neo-impressionists.⁴⁷ He singled out Signac's works as "belle," giving special attention to the artist's Saint-Tropez landscapes: "*Port de Saint-Tropez* is as seductive as possible. I've hardly seen the Mediterranean light rendered with more finesse and fidelity."⁴⁸

[13] Fontainas, who in 1897 had cried "Why M. Signac?", who in 1899 had declared the Independents "almost dead," and concluded "nothing on the walls arouses even the slightest interest,"⁴⁹ would do an abrupt about-face in 1901. He positively situated the neo-impressionists' "community of means" as having "a combination of refined and effective procedures" which "create a very special atmosphere." His praise extended to most of the neo-impressionists, but especially to Signac, who "makes the sparkling and powderiness of the Southern lights sing; nobody excels like he does when he lights up the whiteness of a sail against the shimmering colors of the Mediterranean."⁵⁰ There were certainly many factors leading to the renewed value of the Independents but, in 1901, the works of Signac seem to have been central.

[14] Signac also exhibited four large oil sketches, collectively titled *Projet pour la décoration de la salle des fêtes de la mairie d'Asnières (Project for the Asnières City Hall Decoration)* (Figs. 1, 2), which were much discussed in significantly new ways.⁵¹ They are perhaps the clearest, but by no means the only, example of the shared concerns around

⁴⁵ Verhaeren, "Les Salons," 688: "technique n'est plus discutée comme une gageure et une gaminerie; lentement, elle a pris place dans l'art et ceux qui s'en servent, au moins quelques-uns, sont en passé d'affirmer leur maîtrise."

⁴⁶ Coquiote, "Les Indépendants," 2: "l'âme même de cette admirable Société."

⁴⁷ Ivan, "Le Salon des Indépendants," *L'Encyclopédie Contemporaine* 15, no. 464 (20 May 1901), 79-80, here 79: "le célèbre pointilliste."

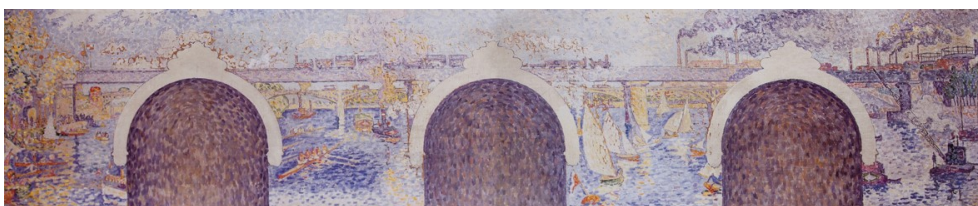
⁴⁸ Ivan, "Le Salon des Indépendants," 79: "*Port de Saint-Tropez* est séduisant au possible. Je n'ai guère vu la lumière méditerranéenne rendue avec plus de finesse et de fidélité." Further enthusiastic praise is found in Sedeyn, "Les Artistes Indépendants," 69, where the seascapes are described as being "d'un éclat, d'une fraîcheur et d'une harmonie remarquable." Guinaudeau, "Le Salon des Indépendants," 2, similarly praised Signac: "La lumière chante merveilleusement dans ces voiles, dans ces arbres, dans ces fuyantes lignes de quais et de bâtisses."

⁴⁹ Fontainas, "Art Moderne," in: *Mercur de France* 32, no. 120 (Dec. 1899), 811-817, here 816: "rien aux murs à présent ne suscite même un pale intérêt."

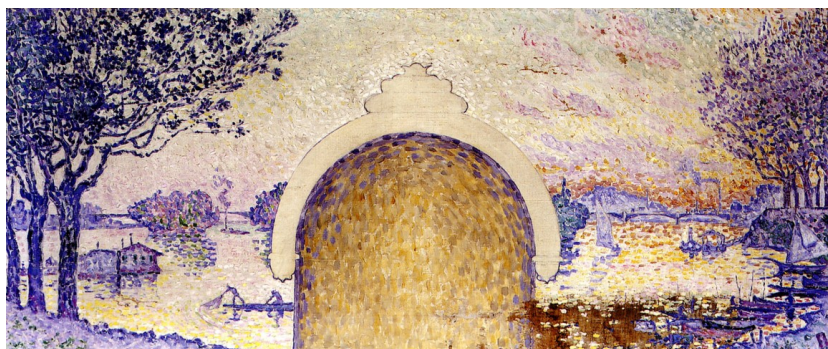
⁵⁰ Fontainas, "Les Artistes Indépendants," 355: "communauté de moyens"; "une alliance de procédés épurés et effectifs" which "crée une atmosphère bien spéciale"; "fait chanter l'étincellement et la pulvérisation des lumières méridionales; nul n'excelle comme lui à allumer la blancheur d'une voile aux chatouillements colorés des eaux méditerranéennes."

⁵¹ They are held in private collections but were reproduced in Cachin, *Signac*, as catalogue numbers 355-358: *Esquisse des cinq fenêtres*, 1900, oil on canvas, 49 x 224 cm; *Esquisse du panneau central no.2*, 1900, oil on canvas, 49 x 112 cm; *Esquisse du panneau central no. 3*, 1900, oil on canvas, 49 x 224 cm; *Esquisse de la voûte unique*, 1900, oil on canvas, 49 x 120 cm.

1900 of the neo-impressionists and the symbolists, especially regarding the functions of decorative art, which Katherine Kuenzli has shown to be central to defining modernism in the first decade of the 20th century.⁵²



1 Paul Signac, *Projet pour la décoration de la salle des fêtes de la mairie d'Asnières: Esquisse du panneau central no. 3 (Project for the Asnières City Hall Decoration: Sketch for the Central Panel no. 3)*, 1900, oil on canvas, 49 x 224 cm. Private Collection (© Archives Signac, photo J. Hyde. Reprod. from: Françoise Cachin, *Signac. Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre*, Paris 2000, p. 127, cat. 357)



2 Paul Signac, *Projet pour la décoration de la mairie d'Asnières: Esquisse de la voûte unique (Project for the Asnières City Hall Decoration: Sketch for the Single Vault)*, 1900, oil on canvas, 49 x 120 cm. Private Collection (© Archives Signac, photo J. Hyde. Reprod. from: Françoise Cachin, *Signac. Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre*, Paris 2000, p. 127, cat. 358)

[15] Signac's canvases had first been exhibited the Hôtel de Ville de Paris, in December 1900, with more than 100 other submissions done for a public contest to win the commission to decorate the Salle des Fêtes of the Mairie d'Asnières.⁵³ He did not expect to win the commission, but asked in his diary, "Has one the right to complain of not having walls to decorate if one does nothing to obtain them?"⁵⁴ Signac did not even make the short-list, despite widespread support for his work. The commission was awarded to Marseillais painter Henry Bouvet (1859-1945), and the jury was roundly denounced for

⁵² Katherine M. Kuenzli, *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle*, Burlington 2010, 25 and passim. On the evolving concept of the decorative see the ground-breaking work by Gloria Groom, ed., *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890-1930*, exh. cat., New Haven, 2001, and especially the essays therein: Nicholas Watkins, "The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic," 1-28, and Gloria Groom, "Into the Mainstream: Decorative Painting, 1900-30," 143-168; on the decorative's relation to neo-impressionism, see Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 5-6 and 162-166.

⁵³ *Discover Asnières-sur-Seine: A guide of heritage tourism*, <http://en.calameo.com/read/00044651974cbea6a0930> (accessed 1 May 2012).

⁵⁴ Paul Signac, *Journal*, t. VI, 11 Nov. 1900, Archives Signac; as quoted and translated in Richard Thomson, "Henri Martin at Toulouse: terre natale and juste milieu," in: *Framing France: The Representation of Landscape in France, 1870-1914*, ed. Richard Thomson, Manchester 1998, 147-172, here 168.

its decision. In the words of Coquiôt: "It is good to call odious, a second time, the judges of the contest."⁵⁵ In *La Revue Blanche*, Félicien Fagus too singled out Signac's proposal, praising it for two full paragraphs, and he concluded that "for the first time, the theories that gave rise to it will be controlled in a full, dazzling, decisive way."⁵⁶

[16] In recent literature, including that of Gloria Groom, Nicholas Watkins and Katherine Kuenzli, the decorative's importance for 20th century art has been highlighted, with a focus on the Nabis. However, as Signac's letters, texts, and the primary criticism makes clear, the neo-impressionists were also deeply invested in the ideals of the decorative. The concept of the decorative was not delimited by style but most commonly implied a contrast with easel painting, and its bourgeois associations; it could relate to an ideal of an elevated, public art or, paradoxically, could suggest the breakdown of hierarchies through the reuniting of the arts and crafts.⁵⁷ For the neo-impressionists, it implied both the large-scale paintings associated with architecture, as well as the more intimate associations that could be created by an easel painting's formal qualities. The decorative was strongly associated with classicism, and both were deeply connected in the French imaginary to the Mediterranean, as revealed by the fact that immediately upon moving to the Saint-Tropez, Signac made his first effort at a large, decorative work: *Femmes au puits. Opus 238 (Jeunes provençales au puits: décoration pour un panneau dans la pénombre)* (*Women at the Well. Opus 238 [Young Girls from Provence at the Well: Decoration for a Panel in the Shadows]*, 1892, oil on canvas, 194.8 x 130.7 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). He followed with an even larger and more clearly decorative work, his manifesto of anarchist ideals, *Au temps d'harmonie: L'âge d'or n'est pas dans le passé, il est dans l'avenir* (*In the Time of Harmony: The Golden Age Is Not in the Past, It Is in the Future*, 1893-1895, oil on canvas, 300 x 400 cm, Mairie de Montreuil, Montreuil) (Fig. 4).⁵⁸ Even though these works were not very well received, Signac persisted, as the Asnières canvases reveal. As he had explained in his 1898 book:

The effect sought by the neo-impressionists, and ensured by divisionism, is a maximum of light, color, and harmony. Their technique thus seems very well suited to decorative compositions, which some of them have sometimes done. But, being excluded from official commissions, and having no large walls to decorate, they wait for the time when they will be allowed to carry out the great undertakings of which they dream.⁵⁹

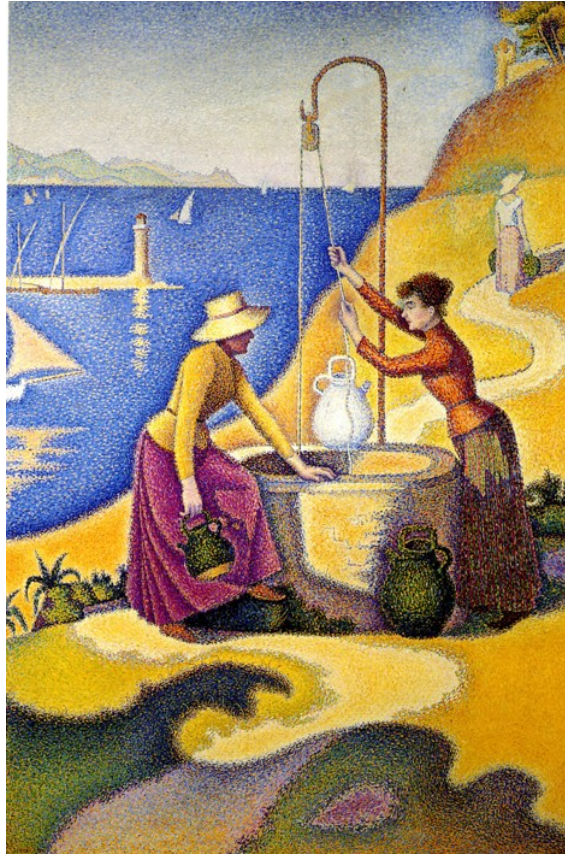
⁵⁵ Coquiôt, "Les Indépendants," 2: "Il est bon de rendre odieux une seconde fois les juges d'un concours."

⁵⁶ Félicien Fagus, "Décoration de la Mairie d'Asnières," in: *La Revue blanche* (Jan.-Apr. 1901): 61-63 here 62: "pour la première fois les théories qui le suscitèrent seraient contrôlées d'une façon pleine, éclatante, décisive."

⁵⁷ Watkins, "The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic," 18-19.

⁵⁸ Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral," 358-363.

⁵⁹ Paul Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au neo-impressionnisme*, 3rd edition, Paris 1921, 84: "L'effet recherché par les néo-impressionnistes et assuré par la division, c'est un maximum de lumière, de coloration et d'harmonie. Leur technique semble donc convenir fort bien aux compositions décoratives, à quoi, d'ailleurs, certains d'entre eux l'ont quelquefois appliquée. Mais, exclus des commandes officielles, n'ayant pas de murailles à décorer, ils attendent des temps où il leur sera



3 Paul Signac, *Femmes au puits* (*Women at the Well*), 1892, oil on canvas, 195 x 131 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (© RMN Musée d'Orsay. Reprod. from: Françoise Cachin, *Signac. Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre*, Paris 2000, p. 110, cat. 234)



4 Paul Signac, *Au temps d'harmonie* (*In the Time of Harmony*), 1894-1895, oil on canvas, 300 x 400 cm. Mairie de Montreuil, Montreuil (Photo: Jean-Luc Tabuteau. Image kindly provided by the Mairie de Montreuil)

permis de réaliser les grandes entreprises dont ils rêvent."

[17] The decorative had been central to neo-impressionism since its founding, as Roslak has shown, yet there was a renewed enthusiasm for its potential in the 20th century.

[18] The artistic success of Signac's Asnières proposal (despite his lack of success in the competition) seems to have encouraged critics to recognize anew neo-impressionism's decorative qualities. Puy, for example, praised the installation of paintings by both Van Rysselberghe and Signac at the Independents in terms that emphasized their decorative potential:

They would light up the walls of village halls magnificently; they have understood modern architecture, in the simplicity of its great lines, and are ready to decorate bright rooms and distinguished rooms, where their vibrant luminosity would balance out; they would bring different qualities than those of Puvis de Chavannes, but derived from him: they see widely and know how to compose, a rare gift.⁶⁰

[19] Puy also took a swipe at the artist who had most successfully used the neo-impressionist technique in the public sphere: Henri Martin (1860-1943).⁶¹ Puy lamented Martin's "pillaging" of neo-impressionist style,⁶² presumably for similar reasons as those decried by Signac, who complained that Martin's use of the technique had been supported by the government, yet drained of its advantages, especially coloristic brilliance.⁶³ As Richard Thomson has made clear, Martin's successful mainstreaming of the technique in such well-known commissions as the Capitole of Toulouse relied on draining it not only of its color, but also of its radical associations.⁶⁴

[20] Verhaeren went even further than most in condemning the choice of the jury: he demanded to know why, when Signac's works had already entered into the German state museum, they were not yet in the collection of the Musée du Luxembourg, France's national museum for living artists.⁶⁵ This call for Signac to be officially recognized and nationally represented would not be answered until 1905, when one of his watercolors was purchased by the Luxembourg. Nevertheless, these calls for national recognition marked a significant shift in the reception of Signac.

[21] In a longer article on the 1901 spring art season, Roger Marx concluded with a tribute to the Independents that repeatedly linked it to freedom. Noting the promising

⁶⁰ Puy, "Les Indépendants," 211: "Ils éclaireraient magnifiquement des murailles de salles des fêtes; ils ont compris l'architecture moderne, dans la simplicité des ses grandes lignes, et sont préparés pour la décoration des halls clairs et des salles élevées, où s'équilibrerait leur vibrante luminosité; ils y apporteraient des qualités différentes de celles de Puvis de Chavannes, mais dérivées de lui: ils voient largement, et don rare, savent composer."

⁶¹ On Martin, see Thomson, "Henri Martin at Toulouse," which is also one of the few examinations of Signac's Asnières works.

⁶² Puy, "Les Indépendants," 210.

⁶³ Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au neo-impressionnisme*, 110; noted in Thomson, "Henri Martin at Toulouse," 166-167.

⁶⁴ Thomson, "Henri Martin at Toulouse," 166-68.

⁶⁵ Verhaeren, "Les Salons," 689.

newcomers to the Independents, Marx singled out the former students of Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), including Henri Matisse (1869-1954). Their works, he suggested, "denounce by their presence the incomprehension or the arbitrary harshness of juries."⁶⁶ The Belgian artists showing, including Van Rysselberghe, were said to be honored "to share the asylum of free art and militant originality with the outcasts."⁶⁷ In this, Marx made this tradition of freedom a national one, French but not Belgian. Marx's final paragraph is worth quoting at length:

Overall, the exhibition of the Independents is more and better than the protesting *Salon des Refusés*; it gives the example of an open society where the rights of all are equal, where everyone is answerable only to himself and remains individually responsible. The artist admits and shows himself as he is, openly without pretense; the viewer, meanwhile, receives no watchword from the jury, follows the inclination of his preferences and decides, in his own way, from beginning to end. Fortunate training for the will, is it not true, that which accustoms man to use his independence to act, to think by himself and for himself, consulting no-one, in the blissfulness of free will!⁶⁸

[22] Marx's text, more than any other in 1901, made it clear that the Society's radical artistic and political history was what gave it its power, for the benefit of both the artist and viewer. Marx took it even further, however, in arguing that the Independents' trained the viewer to exercise his free will and that this would benefit all society. His viewpoint was very close to that of Signac, who had been long working toward a decorative art that could transform the public, and help to bring about a new society (see also Katherine [Brion's article](#) in this Special Issue).⁶⁹

[23] These shifts in the critical reception of both the neo-impressionists and the *Salon des Indépendants* from 1898 to 1901 have made me reconsider why so many young artists were attracted to neo-impressionism and an art of color in the 20th century. After the first flurry of responses at its publication, there were very few published references to Signac's *D'Eugène Delacroix*, and it was not reprinted in France until 1911.⁷⁰ Instead of being explained by a two-year old book, it seems that the renewed success in 1901 was

⁶⁶ Marx, "La Saison d'art," 652: "dénouaient par leur présence l'incompréhension ou les rigueurs arbitraires des jurys."

⁶⁷ Marx, "La Saison d'art," 652: "de partager avec les proscrits l'asile de l'art libre et de l'originalité militante."

⁶⁸ Marx, "La Saison d'art," 652: "Au total, l'exposition des Indépendants est plus et mieux que le Salon protestataire des refusés; elle donne l'exemple d'une société ouverte, où les droits de tous sont égaux, où chacun ne relève que de soi-même et demeure individuellement responsable. L'artiste se confesse et se livre tel qu'il est, sans fard ni feinte; le spectateur, de son côté, ne reçoit point le mot d'ordre des jurys, suit l'inclination de ses préférences et se prononce, à sa guise, en premier et dernier ressort. Heureuse école pour la volonté, n'est-il pas vrai, celle qui habitue ainsi l'homme à user de son indépendance, à agir, à penser par lui-même et pour lui-même, sans prendre conseil de personne, dans la plénitude du libre arbitre!"

⁶⁹ On Signac's earlier major decorative efforts and their relation to anarchism, see Anne Dymond "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," in *The Art Bulletin* 85 (June 2003), 353-370; Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 155-167.

⁷⁰ The 1911 edition was published by Henry Floury, who would publish a third edition in 1921.

owed both to the administrative facts of better timing, site and organization, and, in no small measure, to the neo-impressionists' newly-valued capacity for harmonious decorative art, which had been a pictorial and social goal held by Signac and Cross throughout the latter part of the 1890s. As Roslak has persuasively argued, Signac and Cross had been attempting, since their move to southern France in the early 1890s, "to elevate [their beloved land of the sun] to the level of a decorative monument."⁷¹ Signac's proposal for the Mairie d'Asnières won over many critics. For the first time, it seems, critics such as Roger Marx, who had long preferred symbolism, could see and applaud both the ideals of the neo-impressionists and their execution. Indeed, the primary critical literature makes evident that it was neo-impressionist art, increasingly esteemed from 1901, that led to a renewal of interest in the book, visible around 1904.

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"Towards a New Classical Canon": 1902-1904

[24] Response to the 1902 *Salon des Indépendants* was similar to that of the previous year, with both the exhibition and the group receiving much praise. For example, this year's Independents was praised as one the society's more important,⁷² and Fagus would exclaim "Here is the real Salon!"⁷³ However, three new trends emerged: Signac was increasingly given the lead position in reviews; the neo-impressionists were more often recognized as having distinctive personal styles within the technique; and the importance of the south, with its associations of freedom, the decorative arabesque, and its links to classicism came to the fore in much criticism.

[25] Like many critics, after a laudatory introduction, Henry Bidou turned immediately to discuss Signac.⁷⁴ His effusive praise for *Saint-Tropez* (1901, oil on canvas, 131 x 161.5 cm, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo) is precise and detailed, noting specific lines and colors in the work.⁷⁵ After some appreciative description, Bidou turned to method: "Signac proceeds by pure tones juxtaposed, that is well known. But his art is more delicate."⁷⁶ Bidou went on to closely analyze Signac's touch, noting the individual marks as well as their harmony within the whole.⁷⁷ He instructed viewers: "Examine also the

⁷¹ As translated in Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 167, note 8.

⁷² Henry Bidou, "Le Salon des Indépendants," in: *L'Occident* 1, vol. 5 (Apr. 1902), 255-64, here 255. See also Fontainas, "Art moderne," in: *Mercure de France* 42, no. 149 (May 1902), 523-31, here 526.

⁷³ Fagus, "Les Indépendants," in: *La Revue Blanche* (Apr. 1902): 623-626, here 623: "Voici le vrai Salon!"

⁷⁴ For other reviews beginning with Signac, see also François Hoffmann, "L'exposition de la Société des Artistes Indépendants," in: *Journal Des Arts* (5 Apr. 1902), 2-3, here 2. Even when not discussed first, Signac was given much attention in 1902, as was his solo exhibition in June at Siegfried Bing's *Salon de l'Art Nouveau*.

⁷⁵ Cachin, *Signac*, 249.

⁷⁶ Bidou, "Le Salon des Indépendants," 255-6.

⁷⁷ Bidou, "Le Salon des Indépendants," 256: "que dans le meme coup de pinceau le blanc paraisse près de la couleur, sans s'y fonder et sans l'alourdir, et la laisse vivante et brillante, au lieu de la faire plâtreuse."

way each touch is laid, combined with the canvas which appears here and there, how it is placed for the pleasure of the eye, the beauty of the matter and for its role in the whole."⁷⁸ This kind of close attention to individual works, even to specific marks, was rare enough in art criticism, but it was unparalleled in discussions of Signac and the neo-impressionists, who had often been discussed as having lost their individuality to a 'system.' While Bidou went on to discuss each individual neo-impressionists at length, Edmond Pilon, in *Aujourd'hui*, directly compared Signac's and Van Rysselberghe's differing use of the technique. This recognition that the neo-impressionist method allowed for individual temperament and had evolved greatly since the early 1890s, was noted by Signac in his diary as early as 1895,⁷⁹ but only became more widely admitted in the 20th century.

[26] Even François Hoffmann, critic for the conservative *Journal des Arts*, was positive about Signac in 1902, and he too began his discussion of specific artists with Signac:

Mr. Signac, who for fifteen years has been in the breach as an impressionist painter, in terms of the way of painting, cannot of course please everybody but it is nevertheless true that he still retains his great enthusiasm and increasingly forces himself to simplify and to synthesize according to his caprice, he carries his easel from *Passy* to *Samois* and from *Samois* to *Saint-Tropez*, noting, here and there, that which speaks to his imagination.⁸⁰

[27] Hoffmann thus recognized Signac as grounded in specific locations, but also saw the artist's use of imagination; this balance between the real and the imagined, the objective and the subjective, represents a significant rhetorical move away from the situating of the neo-impressionists as mere technicians following a rulebook. While this was never true of the neo-impressionists, it was only intermittently recognized (see Young's analysis of such rhetorical gambits after Seurat's death in 1891 in this Special Issue). The more negative criticism of the later 1890s tended, however, to blunt the movement's complex negotiation of such issues. Hoffmann and others recognized that the imaginative was not the sole purview of the symbolists. This balanced recognition of technique, imagination, and synthesis, all filtered through the individual artist would recur frequently in the coming years.

[28] By 1902, the importance of the Côte d'Azur, both for the neo-impressionists and modern art, was also frequently mentioned. Signac had been visiting the Mediterranean

⁷⁸ Bidou, "Le Salon des Indépendants," 256: "Examinez aussi la façon dont chaque touche est posée, combine avec la toile qui paraît çà et là, comment elle est accrochée pour le plaisir de l'oeil, la beauté de la matière et pour son rôle dans l'ensemble."

⁷⁹ Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 191.

⁸⁰ Hoffmann, "L'exposition de la Société des Artistes Indépendants," 2: "M. Signac, depuis une quinzaine d'années sur la brèche est un peintre impressionniste, dont la façon de peindre, peut bien ne pas plaire à tout le monde, mais il n'en est pas moins vrai que l'artiste conserve toujours sa belle ardeur et qu'il s'efforce de plus en plus à simplifier et à synthétiser au hasard de son caprice, il promène son cheval de *Passy* à *Samois* et de *Samois* à *Saint-Tropez*, notant, ici et là, ce qui parle à son imagination."

coast regularly since the late 1880s, and settled in the small coastal village of Saint-Tropez in 1892.⁸¹ Cross was similarly ensconced in the south, and both had seen Provence as a location that would be conducive to their desired anarchist future. The art critic Edmond Pilon began his review of the 1902 Independents by praising Cézanne's depictions of "the Provençal countryside" which he said "offers sites that are limpid and rugged by way of its contrasts. Great artists know it and go there. Among them are Messrs. Théo Van Rysselberghe, Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross."⁸² The sunlit port of *Saint-Tropez*, discussed above, was widely praised as "one of the best works by Paul Signac."⁸³ But the southern location, this "strange enchantress,"⁸⁴ was not just visual; it had important cultural connotations, often linked to ideals of French classicism and, by the neo-impressionists, to ideals of freedom and anarchism.⁸⁵ Fagus made the link between the location, the decorative arabesque, and classical ideals explicit. After some complaints about what neo-impressionism lacked, he exclaimed about Cross's works: "but the quivering of these Provençal pines, the beautiful rise towards the arabesque, towards the beautiful line, towards a new classical canon!"⁸⁶ The depiction of the south, captured by the beautiful arabesque line, and thus linked to the decorative, was leading to a new classicism. Classicism was the central terrain being fought over in the 20th century, and as I have argued elsewhere, Signac did not relinquish it to the conservatives, but instead tried to claim it for the anarchist movement.⁸⁷

[29] Fagus would take up this effusive praise for the neo-impressionist style and again link it to the classical and the decorative even more forcefully in his review of the group show at Durand-Ruel that fall. In a long discussion of the importance of decorative arts, including much praise for Van Rysselberghe's decorative ensemble for Victor Horta's Hotel

⁸¹ On his southern experiences, see Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral," 357-363; Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 141-167; Françoise Cachin, "L'Arrivée de Signac à Saint-Tropez," in: Françoise Cachin, Jean-Paul Monerey, and Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, eds., *Signac & Saint-Tropez, 1892-1913*, exh. cat., Saint-Tropez 1992, 11-15; Cachin, ed., *Méditerranée de Courbet à Matisse*, exh. cat., Paris 2000. On Cross see Tania Woloshyn, "Marking out the Maures: Henri-Edmond Cross on the Côte d'Azur," in: Tania Woloshyn and Nicholas Hewitt, eds., *L'Invention du Midi: The Rise of the South of France in the National and International Imagination (Nottingham French Studies 50.1, Special Issue)*, Nottingham 2011, 57-71.

⁸² Edmond Pilon, "XVIII^eme Exposition des Indépendants," in: *Aujourd'hui* 2 (15 May 1902), 42-45, here 43: "la terre provençale offre par ses contrastes, des sites limpides et tournmentés. De grands artistes le savent et y viennent. Du nombre sont MM. Théo Van Rysselberghe, Paul Signac et Henri-Edmond Cross."

⁸³ Tristan Klingsor, "Les Salons de 1902," in: *La Plume* (Jan.-June 1902), 566-571, here 567: "des meilleures toiles de Paul Signac."

⁸⁴ Pilon, "XVIII^eme Exposition des Indépendants," 43: "étrange enchanteresse."

⁸⁵ Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral," 352-357 and passim; Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 97-108 and 146-154; and for an account that emphasizes how it is viewed by those in the political right, see James D. Herbert, *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics*, New Haven 1992, especially 122-124.

⁸⁶ Fagus, "Les Indépendants," 625: "mais le vibrement de ces pins de Provence, la belle ascension vers l'arabesque, vers la belle ligne, vers un nouveau canon classique!"

⁸⁷ Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral," 364-365.

Solvay, Fagus argued that "the universal momentum of painting towards harmony through light and clarity, necessarily led to the logical division of tone."⁸⁸ Fagus went on to describe a new generation (not a school, he says, since they have more diverse sensibilities) of painters, inspired by Seurat, including both the neo-impressionists and the symbolists. As proof of its move toward universality, Fagus noted that they were even followed by academicians such as Henri Martin. And what, Fagus asked, were they moving towards?

Towards a new décor, a new harmony through light and eloquence: towards *style*. Towards something else; that could only lead to splendor too soon frozen of a classicism, of another academy [...] Supreme naivety attained through supreme love, this was the sublime beauty of the Middle Ages and ancient works, and it is towards this that our young renewed art strives without knowing it, and that makes it so alive, so moving, so edifying.⁸⁹

[30] This praise for both symbolists and neo-impressionists recognized their shared interests in the decorative and the classical, and it indicates the neo-impressionists' new-found success in the opening years of the 20th century at claiming the arabesque, the beautiful line, and the classical.

[31] Signac followed his success at the 1902 Independents with his first solo exhibition, at Bing's gallery. This large show included 9 canvases, 12 oil notations, 2 pastels and 100 watercolors.⁹⁰ Response was overwhelmingly positive and often showed a renewed interest in situating Signac's 'science' in a positive light. Many critics noted how much the neo-impressionist technique had changed: Octave Maus, for example, described the technique as having undergone "a pleasing evolution."⁹¹ Fontainas, only recently favorable to neo-impressionism, argued that Signac had productively synthesized art and science:

for him, science did not extinguish spontaneity; on the contrary, science is a great help to him; it teaches him to see and to express with more freedom and ease. These are not the cold school rules based on more or less authentic traditions that make up the method of Mr. Signac; no: he captured a secret of nature, neglected by previous painters.⁹²

⁸⁸ Fagus, "L'Art de demain," in: *La Revue Blanche* (Sept.-Dec. 1902), 542-546, here 545: "l'élan universel de la peinture vers une harmonie par la lumière et la clarté, nécessairement mena à la division logique du ton."

⁸⁹ Fagus, "L'Art de demain," 545-546: "Vers un nouveau décor, une nouvelle harmonie par la lumière et le nombre: vers *le style*. Vers autre chose; cela seul mènerait à la splendeur tôt figée d'un classicisme, d'une autre académie [...] Atteindre par le suprême amour la suprême naïveté, cela fit la beauté sublime des oeuvres du moyen âge comme des oeuvres de l'antiquité, et c'est vers cela que s'évertue à l'insu de lui notre jeune art renouvelé, et qui le fait si vivant, si émouvant, si édifiant."

⁹⁰ Cachin, *Signac*, 373.

⁹¹ Octave Maus, "Exposition Paul Signac," in: *L'Art Moderne* (3 June 1902), 196-197, here 196: "une évolution heureuse."

⁹² Fontainas, "Art moderne," in: *Mercure de France* 43, no. 151 (July 1902), 243-247, here 245: "science n'a pas éteint chez lui la spontanéité; au contraire, elle lui est d'un grand secours; elle lui enseigne à voir et à s'exprimer avec plus de liberté et d'aisance. Ce ne sont pas de froides règles

[32] Maurice Denis, reviewing Signac's watercolors, dismissed concerns about the method, concluding, "Like the constructors of the thirteenth century, of which he has the same lucid spirit, he doesn't oppose, but much to the contrary, he reconciles art and science in the same conscious and reflective manner."⁹³ Both critics praise neo-impressionist technique as something that was 'found' rather than 'made' (to invoke Richard Shiff's observation) through synthesis, and thus classic, and this view echoed throughout the early 20th century reception of the neo-impressionists.⁹⁴

[33] This success of Signac's would be magnified at the next Independents. If the *Gazette des beaux-arts* was the bell-weather of success, its first review of the Independents in 1903 marked their coming of age.⁹⁵ In the journal's review of the show, Henry Cochin was able to find individuality and individual expression, which he situated as art's highest goal, within the pointillist style. He praised Signac, but honored him even more by reproducing a drawing after Signac's *Sisteron* (1902, oil on canvas, 89 x 117, private collection, New York).⁹⁶

[34] The first *Salon d'Automne*, in 1903, was organized in the wake of this resurgence of the Independents. Despite its successes, the *Salon d'Automne* represented, at its founding, a middle path between, on one hand, the conservatism of the Société des artistes français and the Société nationale des beaux-arts and, on the other hand, the anarchism of the Independents.⁹⁷ As one critic quipped in 1910, "The *Salon d'Automne*, – the Independents have arrived."⁹⁸ Its immediate success resulted in changes both within the Independents and in how the group was viewed. As with most post-1900 Independents exhibits, critics continued in 1904 to begin their reviews by noting the democratic governing principles of the group.⁹⁹ In the wake of the founding of the newest Salon, the trend toward situating the Independents as a by-now well-established institution gathered force. As André Mellerio wrote, "There is no longer any need to explain to the readers of the *Revue Universelle* the goal of the Independents, and even d'école, basées sur les traditions plus ou moins authentiques, qui composent la méthode de M. Signac; non: il a surpris un secret de la nature, négligé des peintres antérieurs."

⁹³ M.D. [Maurice Denis], "Aquarelles de Paul Signac," in: *L'Occident* 2, no. 8 (July 1902), 53-54, here 53.

⁹⁴ Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art*, Chicago 1984.

⁹⁵ Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 136, points out the importance of the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, and notes that it did not review the Independents.

⁹⁶ Henry Cochin, "Quelques réflexions sur les salons," in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 29 (1903), 441-464, here 456.

⁹⁷ See Roger Marx's interpretation of its founding, "Le Salon d'Automne," in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 32 (1904), 458-474.

⁹⁸ Anonymously quoted in Gérard Monnier, *L'art et ses institutions en France: de la Révolution à nos jours*, Paris 1995, 273: "Le Salon d'automne, ce sont les Indépendants arrivés."

⁹⁹ For example, the reviews of the Independents that year in: *Le Petit Sou*, *Le Mercure de France*, *L'Aurore*, *Les Annales de la Jeunesse Laïque*, *Les Temps Nouveaux*, *Le Grand National*, and *La Dépêche*.

less of a need to plead the case of the artists who, not wanting to make any concession to the taste of the day, prefer the freedom they enjoy here to the partial constraints of the official Salons."¹⁰⁰ Maurice Le Blond, in *L' Aurore*, began by noting that even though the President of France was not visiting the Independents, they had achieved the status of classic.¹⁰¹ If the Independents was situated as classic, the neo-impressionists continued to be seen as tightly linked to the society and, in parallel fashion, were now typically read as established masters, even veterans.¹⁰² "The Independents gather proudly around the valiant phalanx of the Luces and the Signacs, the Crosses and the Van Rysselberghes," Le Blond continued.¹⁰³ Mellerio praised the salon for its associations with liberty, before moving directly on to discuss the neo-impressionists, and linking them to the promised land of the Mediterranean: "Besides, Saint-Tropez and Antibes are increasingly becoming the promised land for neo-impressionist painters, who find in the opposition of the sky and the sun, the colored sea, powerful trees, motifs with chromatic variation and beautiful linear arabesques."¹⁰⁴

[35] But 1904 also marked a shift toward less positive reviews, with a renewed sense of neo-impressionism's end that has been much noted in art historical literature. Marcel Fouquier in *Le Journal*, for example, suggested that the exhibit clearly showed that the neo-impressionist school was nearly finished: "Its influence can be found almost everywhere but its doctrinal authority is in visible decline. Its methods are no longer applied save by a small group of intransigent artists led by Mr. Signac, for whom the *Vues d'Antibes*, in its ever prestigious charm is more outrageous than ever."¹⁰⁵ However, even this negative assessment admitted the continued influence of the movement, and was relatively positive about Signac. Louis Vauxcelles, who would become one of the most important pre-war critics, was never a fan. Yet even he grudgingly conceded that Signac's seascapes vibrated, but complained that the effect tired and hurt the eyes.¹⁰⁶ Charles Morice remained supportive of the Independents, even predicting that, along with

¹⁰⁰ André Mellerio, "Les Petites Expositions," in: *Revue Universelle* 4, 108, (15 Apr. 1904), 215-216, here 215: "Il n'est plus besoin d'expliquer aux lecteurs de la *Revue Universelle* le but des *Indépendants*, et encore moins de plaider la cause des artistes qui, n'entendant faire aucune concession au goût du jour, préfèrent la liberté dont ils jouissent ici à la demi-contrainte des Salons officiels."

¹⁰¹ Maurice Le Blond, "L'Exposition des Indépendants," in: *L'Aurore* (21 Feb. 1904), 2.

¹⁰² G.M. "Glanes du matin" in: *La Gazette de France* (21 Feb. 1904), 2.

¹⁰³ Maurice Le Blond, "L'Exposition des Indépendants," 2: "Les Indépendants se groupent avec fierté autour de la vaillante phalange des Luce et des Signac, des Cross et des Van Rysselberghe."

¹⁰⁴ Mellerio, "Les Petites Expositions," 215: "Au reste, Saint-Tropez et Antibes deviennent de plus en plus la terre promise des peintres néo-impressionnistes, qui trouvent dans les oppositions du ciel et du sol, de la mer colorée, des arbres puissants, motifs à variations chromatiques et à belles arabesques linéaires."

¹⁰⁵ Marcel Fouquier, "Les Petits Salons," in: *Le Journal* (21 Feb. 1904), 5: "Son influence se retrouve un peu partout, mais son autorité doctrinale s'affaiblit visiblement. Ses procédés ne sont plus appliqués que par un petit groupe d'artistes intransigeants, qui ont pour chef M. Signac, dont les *Vues d'Antibes*, en leur charme toujours prestigieux sont plus outrancières que jamais."

¹⁰⁶ Louis Vauxcelles, "Le Vernissage des Indépendants," in: *Gil Blas* (21 Feb. 1904), 1.

the *Salon d'Automne*, it would outlast the official Salons. Nevertheless, Morice poked gentle fun at neo-impressionism, suggested of their irradiated landscapes that one might get a sunburn "if the sun weren' t so cold!"¹⁰⁷ and then he trotted out some old tropes by criticizing the members as having become formulaic.

[36] Despite some negative criticism, in 1904, Signac and the neo-impressionists were positioned in much criticism as more than merely having achieved a brief second wind; they were seen to be at the height of their powers, as established masters, who through perseverance had mastered their technique. They were rarely described as followers of Seurat, as indeed their style was recognized as having evolved significantly in the more than ten years since his death. They were consistently positioned as the equals to the symbolists, and as similarly striking a decorative balance between the objective and subjective, and, in the case of Cross and Signac, as concerned with the light and color of Provence above all else. The turning point came at the moment of the Independents' resurgence, in 1901, and was concomitant with Signac's attempt to move into large-scale public decorative works. If neo-impressionism in the 20th century has been primarily studied to understand its impact on later artists, it should be recognized that the movement, now twenty years old, had changed dramatically, and was still at the forefront of artistic debates in Paris. In the case of Matisse, it seems especially ahistorical to suggest the influence was brief. Matisse had two sustained periods of interest in neo-impressionism: from 1898 to 1900 he clearly studied Signac's text; then in 1904, he became immersed in the neo-impressionist world, working with and alongside them for a period that did not fully end until the completion of *Le Port d'Abail* (1905-06, oil on canvas, 60 x 148, private collection) – begun during the 'Fauve summer' of 1905, incomplete at the time of that year's *Salon d'Automne*, and finished by the time of its exhibition in the spring of 1906.¹⁰⁸ Given the relative speed at which significant art movements came and went in the 20th century – even Matisse's Fauve period lasted at best three years, roughly equal to his neo-impressionist periods – the high esteem in which Signac and other neo-impressionists were held in the years leading up to 1904 needs to be recognized. Only then can we understand that the definitions of the classical, the decorative, and the French tradition were wide and open to Independents of many stripes.

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¹⁰⁷ Charles Morice, "Le XXe Salon des Indépendants," in: *Mercure de France* 50, no. 173 (May 1904), 405-419, here 408: "Mais que ce soleil est froid!"

¹⁰⁸ Hilary Spurling, *The Unknown Matisse: A Life of Henri Matisse, The Early Years, 1869-1908*, Berkeley 1998, 330.

