Connecting the Dots

Early on Sunday mornings in 1880s Paris on the island of La Grande Jatte, a young painter named George Seurat draws his mistress Dot. This scene sets the stage for Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine’s Sunday in the Park with George, which is inspired by the painting “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte” by 19th-century Impressionist Georges Seurat. Georges Seurat spent more than two years creating a work that, at the time, was dismissed by both critics and the public. His innovative use of minuscule dots of color rather than brush strokes was unheard of at the time. Seurat developed a style that’s known as Pointillism—a blend of art and science based on color theory and the ability of the human eye to combine these dots into a solid color.

Unfortunately, Seurat’s work was criticized as being too mechanical and lacking in spontaneity and “life.” He died in 1891, without ever knowing the recognition he would later receive as the father of the Neo-Impressionist art movement.

This inspiring and heartbreaking musical crosses generations with a story about our need to connect to the past, present, and future. The first act concentrates on the fictionalized life of Seurat during his creation of the painting, and the second act revolves around Seurat’s great-grandson George, a modern artist plagued with self-doubt. It is a testament to the process of making art; a peek inside the mind of a genius struggling with his own artistic needs of expression and the real life that surrounds him.

The musical won the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, two Tony Awards for design, the 1991 Olivier Award for Best Musical and the 2007 Olivier Award for Outstanding Musical Production. It was revived on Broadway last year, starring Jake Gyllenhaal as artist George and great-grandson, and Denver-born actress Annaleigh Ashford as Dot and Marie. Most of the actors in the production play two roles—a character in 1880s Paris during Act I and a different character a century later in Act II.

Sunday in the Park with George is a tribute to what every artist experiences when they step out in front of the public, whether on a stage or on a canvas. Seurat and his great-grandson George tackle the grand task of creation in this story about what it takes, and costs, to be an artist.

ROD A. LANSBERRY
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Georges Seurat’s Science of Color

Georges-Pierre Seurat (December 2, 1859 – March 29, 1891) was a French post-Impressionist painter who sparked a revolutionary new painting technique and inspired an art movement. His large-scale work, “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte” (1884–1886), altered the direction of modern art, and is one of the icons of late 19th-century painting. He was just 25 when he painted it.

Georges Seurat began a distinctive artistic movement based on the science of color theory. The Impressionists’ ideas of painting light and atmosphere impacted his thinking, but he was also interested in the science behind art. He was fascinated by the idea that contrasting colors can optically mix to create far more vivid tones. Known for his scientific approach to painting, Seurat believed artists could use color, lines and intensity to create harmony and emotion.

His theories led him to develop an entire scientific theory and language he called “chromomusiasm.” Rather than blending colors together, he placed tiny strokes of pure color on a canvas. When placed side by side, the colors would appear to blend when viewed from a distance. Today, this technique is better known as Pointillism—a vibrantly different artistic style where paintings are comprised of tiny and precisely placed dots of color. Seurat’s success quickly propelled him to the forefront of the Parisian avant-garde artistic scene.

He was one of the first artists to approach color theory with a systematic and scientific approach, and his work was foundational to the Neo-Impressionist art movement. When the term Neo-Impressionism was coined by art critic Félix Fénéon in 1886, it was to describe Seurat, Signac and Pissarro’s new style of painting. Seurat is beloved by artists with an interest in the visual effects of color, form and light.

Seurat was only 31 when he died, but he left behind an influential body of work as well as a lasting impact on the artistic world. He created seven enormous paintings, hundreds of drawings and sketches, and around 40 smaller paintings. His innovations are still highly influential, shaping the work of artists like Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Signac. The monument A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, the inspiration behind Sondheim’s musical Sunday in the Park with George, is considered an icon of late 19th century art.