POINTS OF VIEW

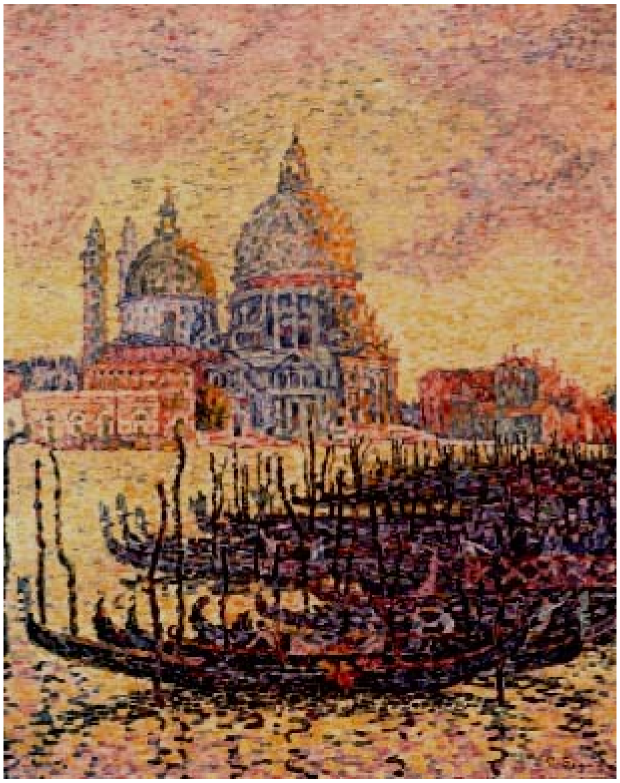
ARTIST PAUL SIGNAC STEPS OUT OF THE SHADOW OF HIS CELEBRATED COLLEAGUE, POINTILLIST GEORGES SEURAT, TO STAR IN A NEW EXHIBITION AT THE MET

Signac at 20

THE FRENCH PAINTER PAUL SIGNAC WAS 27 WHEN his friend and mentor Georges Seurat, only four years older, died of diphtheria in 1891. The shock was enormous. Signac would spend many years of his long life preaching, practicing and elaborating the theories of art that he and Seurat had championed together. He became known, in fact, as Seurat's Saint Paul.

Signac would long lament the world's early failure to recognize Seurat as one of the geniuses of the 19th century. While young artists brimmed with admiration for the dead Vincent van Gogh, Signac wrote in his journal in 1894, Seurat had only "oblivion, silence."

No longer. Seurat is now recognized as one of the sublime talents of his era. His *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte* is practically an icon of modern art, and art history courses hail him as the inventor of Pointillism-the technique of packing "dots" of color together to mold different hues in the eyes of a beholder. A musical based on his work, Sunday in the Park with George, ran for a year and a half on Broadway in the 1980s. But Signac has fared far worse. He has often been regarded as little more than a disciple or mimicker of Seurat. "Scholars have looked on Seurat as the genius and Signac as the promoter," says Susan Alyson Stein, associate curator of European paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. "In Pointillism, there was Seurat and that other guy, Signac."

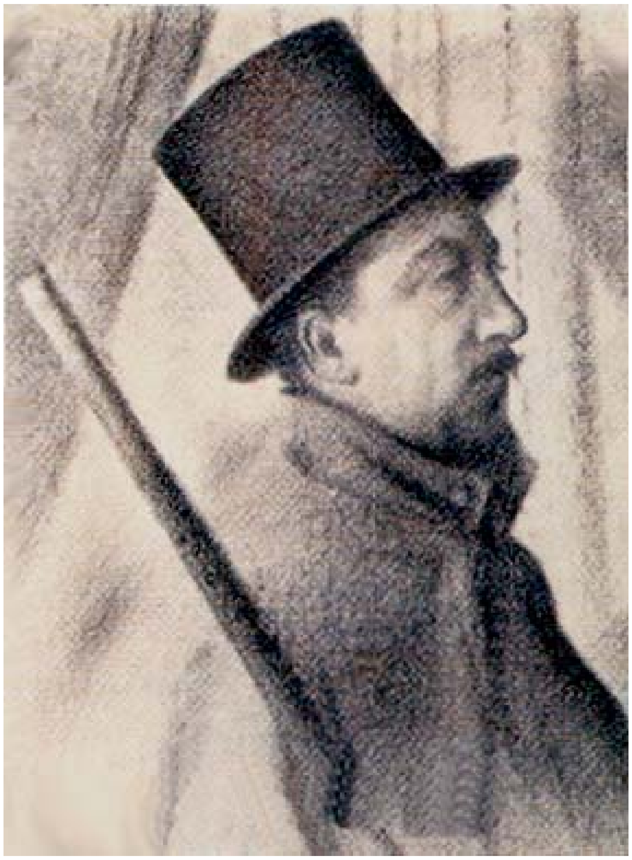


"Whether Signac paints a stormy sea with bobbing Dutch vessels or tranquil waters reflecting ancient Venetian palaces, it is always this sparkling miracle, this rushing palpitation," wrote one critic of such works as Grand Canal, Venice *(1905).*

This judgment will surely change with a major exhibition of the works of Signac opening at the Metropolitan on October 9 after three months at the Galeries nationales du Grand Palais in Paris and three months at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. It is the first major retrospective of Signac's work to be staged in nearly 40 years. The curators believe that the show, which remains at the Metropolitan through December 30, will take Signac out of the shadow of Seurat. They are not trying to prove that Signac was better than his friend, only that he deserves to be judged on his own. "Working on the show, I discovered that Signac was a very different painter," says Stein, one of the exhibition's three curators. "I am always surprised by him."

Signac was a master of serene and exquisite seascapes and the creator of a handful of astounding, luminous portraits. He subjected his oil paintings to the rigors of his scientific theories of color but turned out scores of watercolors in bursts of freedom. Younger artists such as Henri Matisse came to him to study color and light, and traces of Signac's ideas turn up throughout modern art.

Gregarious and energetic—if hot tempered—he moved with ease among the painters, critics, novelists and poets of his day. Signac was a leader of artists, a tireless organizer of exhibitions, a fencer, an anarchist, a sailor with a bevy of regatta medals and a literary critic whose short, privately published treatise on the French novelist Stendhal impressed literary celebrities such as the writer Blaise Cendrars, who later deemed it "the smallest great book in the world."



Signac by Seurat, 1890

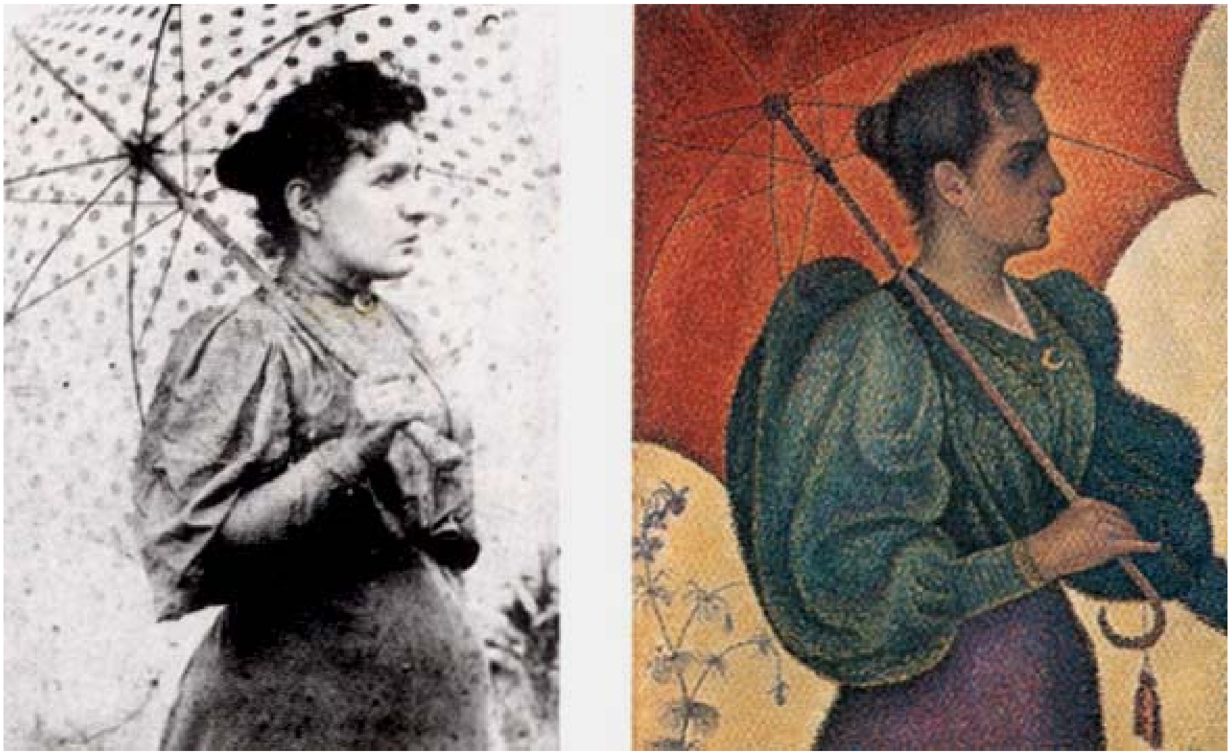
Georges Seurat, c. 1888

Born in 1863, Signac grew up the only child in a prosperous family. His father and grandfather ran a fashionable Paris saddle and harness shop whose clientele included Emperor Napoléon III. Signac's father died of tuberculosis when Signac was 16, and the family sold the shop for a small fortune. His indulgent mother allowed him to quit school, rent a room in Montmartre and try to turn himself into a painter. He was largely self-taught. "My family wanted me to be an architect," he recalled years later, "but I preferred to draw on the banks of the Seine rather than in a studio at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts."

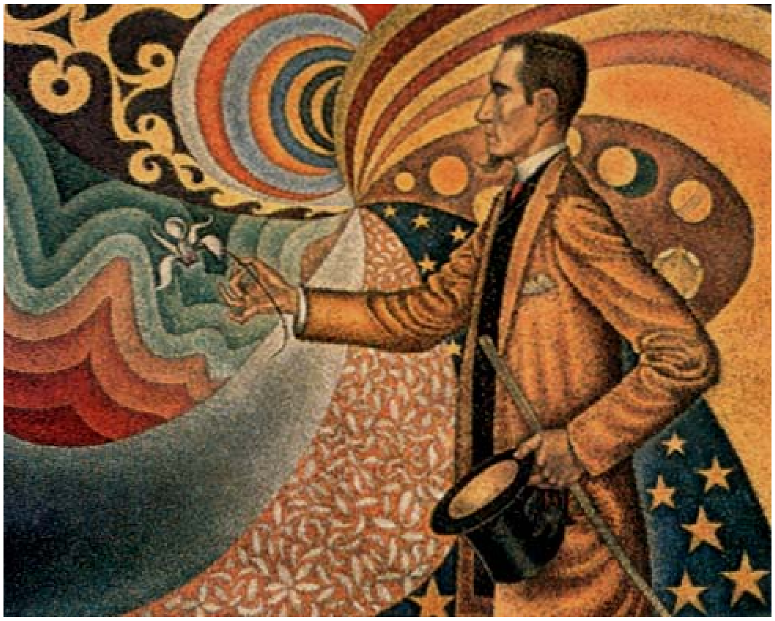
He did try an art class for a few months but learned far more by studying and copying old masters and contemporaries. Once, as he later liked to recount, while trying to sketch a work by Edgar Degas at an Impressionist exhibition, he was shown the door by Paul Gauguin. "One does not copy here, Monsieur," Gauguin admonished.

Signac revered the Impressionists. To Claude Monet, some 20 years his senior, he wrote: "I have been following the wonderful path you broke for us," but "I fear I may lose my way." He begged for a brief meeting so that Monet could give him "the counsel I need so badly, for the fact is that I have the most horrible doubts, having always worked by myself, without teacher, encouragement or criticism." Monet agreed to receive him at a Paris hotel, and the two became lifelong friends.

Signac showed up often at the Chat Noir cabaret and other haunts of avant-garde artists and writers. His constant companion was Berthe Roblès, a milliner a year older who was a distant cousin of the painter Camille Pissarro. Signac did not paint figures often, but when he painted women, Berthe was the usual model. We catch a glimpse of her in a number of his paintings, including his 1893 *Woman with a Parasol* (opposite). In one of his many letters to his mother, to whom he was devoted, Signac recounted Berthe's features: "very black hair—brown-olive skin-small, plump—the half creole, half gypsy type—the most beautiful eyes in the world, so soft and so good." They married in Paris in 1892, ten years after they met. Signac was a few days short of 29, Berthe was 30.



Signac's wife, Berthe (c. 1893), was the model for his virtuoso study in color, Woman with a Parasol, painted shortly after they married.



Signac's 1890 portrait of art critic and fellow anarchist Félix Fénéon, a booster of the artist and of Neo-Impressionism in general, reflects Signac's preoccupation at the time with decorative motifs, Japanese prints and abstraction.

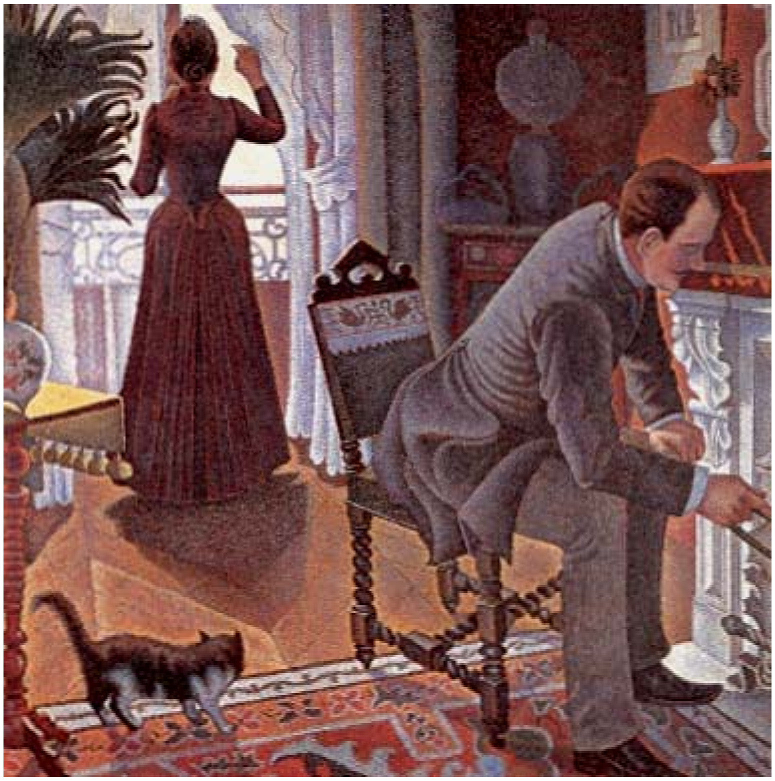
Signac had first encountered Seurat at the Salon des Artistes Indépendants in 1884, an exhibition organized for artists rejected by the main salon of French artists and for those like Signac who did not even try to win admission. The two soon became close friends. They were odd companions, almost opposites, for Signac was extroverted and garrulous while Seurat was reserved and taciturn.

Despite their differences, the two were united in their desire to explore fresh ways of painting. They worked at a time when such wonders as electric power, the telephone and the phonograph were becoming available, and the theories of Charles Darwin dominated intellectual thinking. To prove modern and progressive, artists and writers invoked the muse of science.

Though Signac admired the Impressionists, both he and Seurat believed that a rational order needed to be imposed on the artists' haphazard impressions of color and light. Seurat was the first to come up with the technique of painting in small separate strokes. His *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte* attracted both notoriety and praise when it was exhibited at the eighth and last exhibition of the Impressionists in May 1886. Although the stiff figures, pointillist technique and large size irritated some critics and patrons, it drew a good deal of attention from younger critics, who looked on it as a form of social satire and admired it for its innovative techniques. Along with the work of Signac, Seurat spawned a movement that critic Félix Fénéon would admiringly dub Neo-Impressionism.

In June 1899, at the age of 35, Signac published a manifesto defending his and Seurat's approach titled *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*. In it, he insisted that the Neo-Impressionists could fashion truer color and light than painters who mixed paints on their palettes, because the Neo-Impressionists were following principles based on the scientific laws governing the way that colored light is perceived. By juxtaposing small touches of different paints on the canvas directly, he argued, the colors would blend in the viewer's eye. He called this "optic mixing."

The work was laborious, for a painter might have to wait for one stroke to dry before applying another of a different color. To achieve a "maximum of light, color and harmony," Signac insisted, a Neo-Impressionist had to take into account how colors affected one another. A dark color next to a light color, for example, could make the dark darker and the light lighter. Signac likened the process to that of a composer taking each instrument into account while creating a symphony.



Although criticized for its stiff figures, stifling atmosphere and dark colors, Sunday *(1888-90) manages to evoke the sense of psychological estrangement Signac intended.*

Fortunately, the rules were not always followed slavishly, and a painting's beauty remained more important than how it was produced. "We are in a studio, not a laboratory," Fénéon, who became Signac's friend and greatest supporter, declared in a letter to the artist. And Signac agreed.

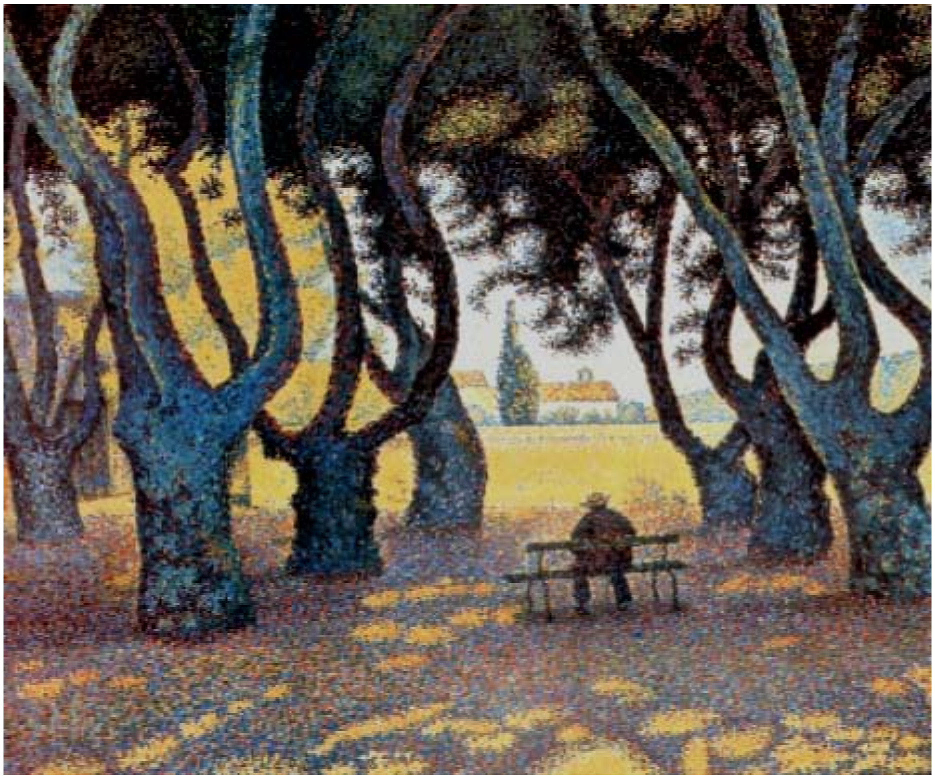
Although Signac's métier was outdoor scenery, he did try his hand at several interior views while Seurat was alive. Two of the most imposing, *The Dining Room* and *Sunday* (right), are in the Metropolitan exhibition. The heavily colored scenes, with their static figures, got mixed reviews from the critics, and for the most part, Signac abandoned the indoors in his work thereafter.

In a profile of Signac that Fénéon wrote for a serial publication called *Los Hommes d'Aujourd'hui*, the critic described the painter as "the young glory of Neo-Impressionism." The issue featured a drawing by Seurat of Signac in top hat, cape, cane and beard (p. 2), but otherwise Seurat went unmentioned. He wrote an angry letter to Fénéon pointing to "my prior paternity" as a Neo-Impressionist. "Signac's evolution was slower," he maintained. Signac, for his part, always credited Seurat with producing the first Neo-Impressionist painting.

After the profile of Signac was published, the artist offered to create "a painted, lifesize biography" of Fénéon. "I am only too willing to be your accomplice," the critic replied. The Met's Stein calls the resulting painting "one of the best portraits done in the last hundred years."

In it, Signac depicted the tall, dandified civil servant-turned-critic with a flower in the outstretched slim fingers of his right hand and a top hat, cane and gloves clutched in his other. He is marching across an abstract swirling mass of color in curves, waves and arabesques, inspired both by a Japanese woodblock print and a loosely rendered color wheel.

Signac tried hard to persuade other artists to take up Neo-Impressionism. Van Gogh, who met Signac in 1887 and painted with him for a while outside Paris, even tried the technique for a time. But, though fascinated by Signac's original use of color, the Dutch artist was too excitable a spirit to submit to the rigors of Neo-Impressionism.



Signac often painted scenes of his beloved Saint-Tropez. In Plane Trees, Place Des Lices *(1893), the pronounced stylization of the trees and rhythmic repetition of arabesque forms signal his ongoing interest in ornamental effects.*

While Van Gogh was hospitalized in Aries in March 1889 (he had cut off part of his ear the previous year and had suffered a recent breakdown), Signac visited him and persuaded the doctor to let him out for the day so that he could show Signac his paintings. Ironically, the self-destructive Van Gogh was relieved to find his more stable companion quite agreeable. "I find Signac very calm," Van Gogh wrote his brother Theo, "although they say he is so violent. He seemed self-assured and well-balanced to me.... I have rarely or never had a conversation with an impressionist that was so free on both sides from disagreements or unpleasant clashes." Van Gogh presented Signac with a still life of two herrings as a gift and later thanked him in a letter for a visit that "helped lift my spirits." But he added that he still felt "a vast amount of inward despair." He would kill himself a year later.

Two weeks after his visit to Arles, Signac did lose his temper badly. During a stay in the town of Cassis, he complained to the mayor and priest that the bells of a nearby church were keeping him awake in his hotel, and a nasty argument erupted between the artist and a church member. Signac was challenged to a duel. The two men exchanged seconds and scheduled a duel with swords in Paris. But tempers must have cooled, as there is no evidence that the duel ever took place.

When Seurat died suddenly a couple of years later, Signac, by all accounts, was shocked and upset. "Horrible news," he wrote Belgian painter Théo Van Rysselberghe. "Our poor Seurat is dead." At the burial in Père-Lachaise Cemetery, Camille Pissarro found Signac "deeply moved."

In the years that followed, Signac took it upon himself to become Neo-Impressionism's chief proponent. While painters like Pissarro and later Matisse would flirt with Neo-Impressionism, they did not stay. Only lesser-known painters like Signac's good friend Henri-Edmond Cross remained.

In the summer of 1891, Signac anchored his yacht *Olympia* in Concarneau on the Brittany coast and produced a series of paintings that rank among his greatest achievements--tranquil scenes of fishing boats slipping in and out of port. John Leighton, director of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and one of the current exhibition's curators, says that these paintings conjure "the effect of a slowly unfolding performance, played out in resonant and deliberate color harmonies." The metaphor would have pleased Signac, for he had assigned musical terms to these paintings, three of which are in the Met exhibition.

Decades before it would become chic, in May 1892, Signac discovered Saint-Tropez on France's Côte d'Azur. "I am settled here since yesterday," Signac wrote his mother, "and I am swimming in joy.... There is enough material to work on for the rest of my days. Happiness--that is what I have just discovered." From then on, he would try to devote a good part of each year to Saint-Tropez or some other Mediterranean port. The north of France had color, but the south had light. The light was so powerful, he said, that it gobbled up color.

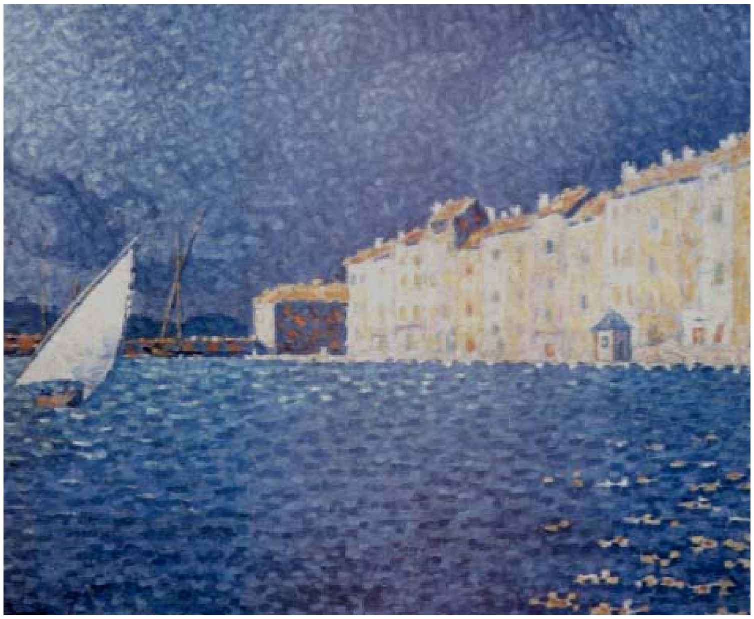
Signac and artist Jeanne Selmersheim-Desgrange (in Antibes, 1913) fell in love c. 1909 while she was his student.

With Seurat, the master of the large mural, dead, Signac took on his own imposing canvas. The 13-foot-wide *In the Time of Harmony* depicts revelers frolicking in the Saint-Tropez sun in an anarchist vision of a utopian future and includes a self-portrait of the artist, barefoot, taking a fig off a tree, and a languid Berthe feeding a cherry to a naked child. The blatantly political, somewhat corny painting was not well received by critics and was one of Signac's last attempts to make a political statement in a painting. He did not, however, curtail his activism. He was a fervent supporter of Emile Zola in the novelist's campaign to free Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish army captain imprisoned on trumped-up treason charges. Berthe herself was of Jewish descent, and when Signac heard of Degas's anti-Semitic diatribes during the Dreyfus affair, he sold his only Degas--a pastel of an actress in a green gown--one of the prize pieces in his collection. He would not buy another Degas until after the artist's death.

An avid sailor, Signac (on his yacht Olympia c. 1895) admired Joseph Conrad's tales of the sea.

Signac spent the last four decades of his life mainly producing scenes of port and river life. Photographs and portraits by friends like Pierre Bonnard and Théo Van Rysselberghe show a forceful, bearded Signac at sea, often in a dark sailor's cap and a sweater. Sails, boats, nets, fishermen and wharves now attracted him as an artist the way haystacks and water lilies fascinated Monet. Although many of the seascapes look to be similar at first glance, some, such as his eerie 1895 *Storm, Saint-Tropez* (*below*), stand out. His style had evolved. Now, instead of trying to reproduce nature's colors scientifically, he simply tried to create "the most harmonious, the most luminous and the most colorful result.... "No longer setting down dots on his canvases, he used broad brush strokes to create separate blocks of color, almost like a mosaic. As paintings such as his 1905 *Grand Canal, Venice* demonstrate, he had become more decorative and less rigid.

As he grew older, Signac turned increasingly to watercolors, which he first came to at Pissarro's suggestion as a way of catching impressions or taking "notes" for use in his studio oils. Soon he was creating them for their own sake. With their freshness and disorder, they are among his finest achievements.



Signac first sailed into Saint-Tropez in May 1892 aboard his 36-foot cutter Olympia. Over time, he would portray many moods of its picturesque harbor. The simple composition and freer execution of The Storm, Saint-Tropez *(1895) marks a change in Signac's style.*

During World War I, Signac was distressed at his fellow anarchists and pacifists for abandoning their international ideals to fight for their countries, and he did little painting. His production in the 20th century was slowed as well by his work as an organizer of exhibitions, and possibly by complications in his personal life. He had fallen in love with Jeanne Selmersheim-Desgrange, a painter and designer of jewelry, who was married and the mother of three children. Ridden by guilt, he maintained Berthe in their Saint-Tropez villa and moved with Jeanne into another house on the Mediterranean in Antibes. He visited and wrote to Berthe often, and they never divorced. Jeanne gave birth to a girl, his only child, in 1913, when he was nearly 50 years old. Named Ginette, after the heroine of a Stendhal novel, she grew up to marry a physician, Charles Cachin, the son of a Communist Party leader who was an old friend of Signac's. Their daughter, Françoise Cachin, is a distinguished art curator who retired earlier this year as director of the national museums of France.

In 1929 Signac's friend Gaston Lévy, the founder of the French Monoprix department-store chain, commissioned him to sail into 100 French ports and paint two watercolors in each, one for Lévy, the other for the artist himself. Signac, who had conceived the idea for the project, estimated he would complete it in six months, but it took two years. Several of these paintings, some of Signac's finest, will be included in the Metropolitan's exhibition.

In his last months, the lifelong pacifist participated in an antifascist rally, criticizing Adolf Hitler and calling for a boycott of German products. After a sailing trip to Corsica, he developed kidney problems and died in Paris on August 15, 1935, at the age of 71.

Although Signac lived well into the 20th century, he hardly belonged to it. He was, as Françoise Cachin has written, "one of the last nineteenth-century presences, linked by his optimism and positivist faith in the future of technical and human progress to the great hopes of romanticism."

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By Stanley Meisler

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