

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Study for A Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte: Couple Walking by Georges Seurat



Title:	Study for A Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte: Couple Walking
Maker:	Georges-Pierre Seurat (1859-1891)
Medium:	Oil on canvas with squaring up in conté crayon
Date:	c. 1884-86
Dimensions:	h. 81 x w. 65 cm
Museum No:	On loan from The Provost and Fellows of King's College (Keynes Collection)
Gallery:	5

Key Dates for Seurat

1859	Born in Paris to a wealthy family
1875	Takes drawing lessons at a local art school
1878	Becomes a student at the official École des Beaux-Arts
1879	Military service at Brest, where he draws marine subjects
1880	Returns to Paris where he devotes himself to black and white drawing
1883	Works on <i>Bathing at Asnières</i> (National Gallery)
1884	PAINTS THIS PAINTING and meets Paul Signac, helps to found the Société des Artistes Indépendants
1886	Exhibits <i>La Grande Jatte</i> at final Impressionist exhibition
1887	Visits Brussels where his work is exhibited with avant-garde Belgian group 'The Twenty'.
1890	His mistress Madeleine Knobloch gives birth to his son
1891	Dies suddenly in Paris, probably of meningitis.

Georges Seurat is best known for his novel technique of painting in tiny dots of colour, the method known as '*pointillism*'. Although he was attracted by the same subjects as his Impressionist contemporaries – seascapes, summer by the River Seine, the entertainers of the Parisian nightclubs – the execution of his paintings was lengthy, measured, studio-based and scientific rather than spontaneous.

Initially he would cover the canvas with a layer of paint. On top of this he painted a layer of local colours in broad, textured strokes. He then began to build up the painting in small sections using multi-coloured dots, using unmixed pigment in optical mixtures of complementary or similar colours.

Seurat began work on *La Grande Jatte* in 1884. For months he visited the little island on the Seine which was a popular weekend pleasure resort on the outskirts of Paris. The sketches and studies he made on the spot led to three large-scale preliminary studies in oil on canvas (of which this is one) which Seurat used to prepare his painting, which now hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago. The huge painting, 3.5 metres wide, was first exhibited at the eighth and last Impressionist exhibition in 1886 and earned Seurat instant notoriety.

In this sketch Seurat sets out the broad chromatic structure of the composition. This also maps out the passages of light and shade. Underneath the paint layer can be seen a grid drawn in conté crayon on top of a commercially prepared white ground, again revealing Seurat's planning process. The grid corresponds to the one on the compositional sketch for the painting in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and was a device he used to transfer the layout from the preliminary sketches enlarged onto the huge canvas.

The identity of the elegant couple dominating this sketch is not certain. In the finished painting the woman holds the leash of a long-tailed monkey which has led some to suggest she is a prostitute perched on the arm of her client. Another, more recent, theory suggests that Seurat was having a dig at the fashionable pretensions of these Sunday promenaders.