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The Perplexing Depth of Seurat's Dots

At first glance, George Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* shows an active day at a park in Paris with various bourgeois characters scattered about, but one can't help but shake the glowing pull the painting has. Why is that? What creates that depth of luminosity? The 1884-86 oil painting uses color organization of various brushstrokes to develop this new texture of paint on canvas. The painting depicts the bourgeois people of Paris at the time, sitting out in the park with family and friends, enjoying an afternoon. Divided into their diverse groupings, layed across the lawn, looking out at the water surrounding them. In this essay, I will break down Seurat's use of color placement and organization in his brushstrokes by describing the visual elements of the painting.

When looking closely at the brushstrokes in *Sunday Afternoon*, one would notice that they are simply not brushstrokes at all but dots. There are no strokes or lines, but dots applied in a line to create a shape. Seurat is breaking down the form into just a pigment in a circle, becoming just the act of applying color to canvas. There is an impression of uniformity in the dots because of the positive space between the figures. Looking at the lady in purple with the umbrella in the forefront of the image, look at the distance between her and the black dog in front of her. It is just green to harsh black on both sides, developing the lines of the figures. Since

there isn't a set main object to focus the eye of the viewer, the space of the painting is filled with the nature of the park and upper-class people. This use of space drags the eyes of the viewer across the canvas. The dots vary in size, creating prominent shapes that are repeated throughout the piece. In the umbrellas and sails, the crescent shape is duplicated often. The cylinder shape is frequent in the length of women's dresses, trees, and men's top hats. Also, through the depth of shading, some of these shapes are expanded to three-dimensional forms. This is a call back to his point technique of applying the paint.

The color organization of Seurat's dots builds the piece's luminous energy. If Seurat places pure unblended colors on the canvas, how does this create that dimension and depth? By applying various sizes, shapes, and shades of the dots, he is imposing the color's pigment on the other and complementing it. For example, when zooming in on the lake's water, there are blue and green color blocks beside one another to make a water hue. Seurat avoided harsh lines to define and establish deeper contours, defining shading to soften objects like clothing and umbrellas around the park. For some of the figures, it seems as though there is a glowing halo around their whole being; this is from the darker shades of their pigments meeting the background. There are no harsh lines but pure, unblended darker, colored dots placed in close conjunction with lighter tones to create this glowing depth of luminosity, giving dimension to the color experience of *Sunday Afternoon*. The woman on the right side of the canvas in the forefront is wearing a black top; it can't get any darker pigment than that. Seurat applies solid black dots in conjunction with dark purple, then gets lighter and lighter with the pigment traveling down the dress and using other color variants of purple to achieve the drapery. These

principles of color organization stem from the impressionist movement and a classical structure from the Renaissance, building a new perception of highlights and shadows.

Seurat's pointillism technique creates a soft and almost gradient texture over the painting, leaving the dots to nearly melt together. The unblended highlight and shadow tones placed directly next to one another produce this luminous glow of energy. The figures are arranged in diminishing perspectives along the bank of the river, with the darker clothed figures in the forefront shaded. And the brighter characters, standing in the sun, are in the composition's rear, merely reduced to brown and white colors. Building an inconsistent scale of people throughout the composition prefigures the idea of dots applied in various sizes and shapes. Seurat's placement of repeated poses of characters and umbrellas scattered through the frame gives the piece a sense of balanced pattern. It has a youthful energy built into its unity of color and texture.

George Seurat's 1884-86 oil painting *Sunday Afternoon* uses principles of color organization in his abstract brushstrokes to create a new gradient texture of paint on canvas. Seurat layers the piece with unblended colored dots, making this glowing luminosity and giving the color experience dimension. The subject matter uses this broken-down form to portray a radiant energy on canvas. This piece is timeless thanks to its modern technique of color placement and mundane narrative.