

DUKE STREET GALLERY
INFORMATION SHEET



PAUL SIGNAC (1863-1935)
RIVAGE MEDITERRANEEN

Sepia wash drawing on paper
Signed and dated, 1917
11.75" x 17.75"

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Paul Signac

Paul Signac was a French neo-impressionist painter, one of the originators of the technique known as pointillism or divisionism. Upon Seurat's death, he succeeded him as leader of the Neo-Impressionists.

Signac was born in Paris on November 11, 1863. He originally planned to study architecture, but upon getting to know the Impressionist school, he decided to become an artist, his prosperous shopkeeping family giving him financial independence. He painted in Paris with his friend Armand Guillaumin, an artist on the fringe of Impressionism.

In 1884 he met Monet and Georges Seurat. He was struck by the systematic working methods of Seurat, and his theory of colors and became Seurat's faithful supporter. Under his influence he abandoned the short brushstrokes of impressionism to experiment with scientifically juxtaposed small dots of pure color, intended to combine and blend not on the canvas but in the viewer's eye, the defining feature of pointillism.

Signac was tireless in his attempts to convert others to Seurat's methods. In 1885 Signac met Camille Pissarro, whom he introduced to Seurat. Finding in Seurat's technique the answer to his craving to a rational style, Pissarro adopted it with enthusiasm. Against the wishes of the Impressionists, he invited the Pointillist to participate in their eighth and last group show in 1886. On this occasion Signac exhibited mostly scenes of the Breton port of Saint-Briac and of the Paris suburbs. A big canvas, *Two Milliners*, 1885, was the first example of the application of the Divisionist technique (also called Neo-impressionist and Pointillist) to an outdoor subject.

Many of Signac's paintings are of the French coast. He left the capital each summer, to stay in the south of France in the village of Collioure or at St. Tropez, where he bought a house and invited his friends. In March, 1889, he visited Vincent van Gogh at Arles. The next year he made a short trip to Italy, seeing Genoa, Florence, and Naples.

Signac loved sailing and began to travel in 1892, sailing a small boat to almost all the ports of France, to Holland, and around the Mediterranean as far as Constantinople, basing his boat at St. Tropez, which he "discovered." From his various ports of call, Signac brought back vibrant, colorful watercolors, sketched rapidly from nature. From these sketches, he painted large studio canvases that are carefully worked out in small, mosaic-like squares of color, quite different from the tiny, variegated dots previously used by Seurat.

His friends included the journalist Felix Fénéon and the scientist and mathematician Charles Henry, both of whom were interested in Neo-Impressionism and published their views on color theory. In 1890 Fénéon devoted an issue of "*Les Hommes d'Aujourd'hui*" to the work of Signac. In the same year the artist painted a picture entitled *Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angels, Tones and Colors*, and a *Portrait of Felix Fénéon*. The abstract patterning of the background had some part in the development of Symbolism.

Signac contributed annually to the Salon des Independants. He was the first non-Belgian member of the avant-garde Brussels Société des XX, with which he showed for some years. In Brussels in 1889, he supported Toulouse-Lautrec in his quarrel with a minor Belgian painter who had insulted Vincent van Gogh. With Seurat and van Gogh, Signac exhibited in Paris in 1887 at Le Théâtre Libre.

After Seurat's death in 1891, he helped to list and classify his work. The leadership of the Neo-impressionist movement, he felt, rested now with himself. In 1892 he took part in a Neo-Impressionist group show. Among many exhibitions that he helped to organize were memorial shows for van Gogh and Seurat, in 1891 and 1892 respectively.

Signac himself experimented with various media. As well as oil paintings and watercolors he made etchings, lithographs, and many pen-and-ink sketches composed of small, laborious dots.

Watercolours form an important part of Signac's oeuvre and he produced a large quantity during his numerous visits to Collioure, Port-en-Bressin, La Rochelle, Marseille, Venice and Istanbul. The fluid medium allowed for more freedom than is found in his rather rigid oil paintings which are sometimes encumbered by the demands of theory. Colour being an important aspect of the artist's work, monochrome wash drawings such as *Scène de marché* are more rare. His methods in general were more precise and scientific than Seurat's, his paintings richer in color and more luminous.

The neo-impressionists influenced the next generation; Signac inspired Henri Matisse and André Derian in particular, thus playing a decisive role in the evolution of Fauvism. As president of the annual Salon des Independants from 1908 until his death, Signac encouraged younger artists (he was the first to buy a painting by Matisse) by exhibiting the controversial works of the Fauves and the Cubists.

After 1900 Signac moved away from pointillism, opting instead for small squares of color to create a mosaiclike effect, as in *View of the Port of Marseilles* (1905, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City) or *The blessing of the tuna fleet at Groix* (1923, Minneapolis Institute of Arts). When he died in Paris in 1935, however, the style to which he dedicated himself had long ceased to be revolutionary.

Signac was untiring in his research and in his desire to expound his theories, and was extremely important as a writer on art. His book, *From Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism* (1899), a summary of the ideas and theories of the movement, is a standard text on the subject. He wrote an excellent study of Jongkind, a fine article on "The Subject in Painting" for a French encyclopedia, and other important articles and catalogue introductions.