



Seurat and the Making of La Grande Jatte

Robert L. Herbert

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"The miracle of La Grande Jatte is its coincidence of critical distinction and popular celebration. High, low, mass, and popular cultures meet in mutual delight, continuing to revel in the mysteries of that Parisian Sunday."—from "The Park in the Museum" by Neil Harris

"Bedlam," "scandal," and "hilarity" were among the epithets used to describe the effect of what is now considered Georges Seurat's greatest work, and one of the most remarkable paintings of the nineteenth century, when it was first exhibited in Paris in 1886. *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884*, an extensive landscape peopled with over forty figures, took the artist almost two years to complete. This sumptuous book, created to accompany a major exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, provides a fascinating, in-depth examination of the gestation, execution, and influence of Seurat's masterpiece.

La Grande Jatte has been part of the Art Institute of Chicago's collection since 1926. Bringing together all known studies and drawings directly related to the painting, this volume provides a visual and contextual survey of Seurat's working methods and aesthetic priorities, as well as the evolutionary process that culminated in his singular achievement. Included are more than fifty-five preparatory works, ranging from rich *conté* crayon drawings to oil sketches on small wood panels to larger studies painted on canvas. In their quantity, intricacy, and variety, these works reveal a compositional process that harks back to Old Master traditions and methods, which had been largely abandoned by Seurat's immediate predecessors, the Impressionists. The many studies attest to the artist's ambitions for his masterpiece and open up a broader context for understanding the work.

Seurat scholar Robert L. Herbert makes new revelations about the painting's relationship to its preparatory studies, stressing Seurat's empirical craftsmanship. He compares *La Grande Jatte* to paintings by Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and Signac and analyzes the ways that twentieth-century critics, including Meyer Schapiro, T.J. Clark, and Linda Nochlin, have viewed the picture. He proposes that the enduring fascination of the famous canvas comes from Seurat's mixture of fashion and irony. Also giving new perspectives in this book, the noted cultural historian Neil Harris charts how and why *La Grande Jatte* attained its revered status at the Art Institute of Chicago and throughout the United States. Additionally, the exhibition's cocurators examine the painting's place in the museum's collection. Essays by Art Institute conservators show how Seurat transferred and altered figures from studies to final canvas and elucidate the exact nature of his pigments and brushwork. Color scientist Roy Berns traces the efforts to digitally recapture the original hues of Seurat's time-altered masterpiece. A landmark publication, this book provides dazzling proof of why *La Grande Jatte* is among the most frequently reproduced paintings in the world and why it continues to fascinate scholars and art lovers today.

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