

SEURAT'S

FOLLOWERS

## THE COLLECTION OF HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER

Georges Seurat has gone down in history as the father of neo-impressionism. His new painting technique soon acquires a large following among young artists, in France and elsewhere.

Neo-impressionism features conspicuously in the collection of Helene Kröller-Müller (Horst, Germany 1869-Otterlo 1939), the founder of the Kröller-Müller Museum. She begins collecting art in the early years of the twentieth century. With her collection, she aims to show the development in art from realism to abstraction since circa 1850.

Helene comes into contact with Seurat's work and that of his imitators via her artistic advisor, the art teacher and critic H.P. Bremmer and via architect Henry van de Velde. Seurat's quest to depict reality reduced to its essence appeals to her personally. At the time of her first Seurat acquisition, in 1912, she writes that he has developed neo-impressionism 'to attain a spiritualisation of art: applying the colour to the

canvas dot by dot, to thus contemplate things more peacefully and profoundly'.

Thanks to Helene Kröller-Müller, the museum today boasts not only one of the finest Seurat collections in the world, but also a large number of neo-impressionist works by artists such as Paul Signac, Maximilien Luce, Henri Edmond Cross, Henry van de Velde, Théo Van Rysselberghe, Johan Aarts, Jan Vijlbrief, Jan Toorop, Leo Gestel, H.P. Bremmer, Jan Sluijters and Johan Thorn Prikker.

Most of these artists are not particularly concerned with the theoretical basis of neo-impressionism that Seurat defended so fervently. It is above all the visual effect of the unmixed dots of paint on the canvas and the complementary colours that attracts them. Therefore Seurat's followers experiment freely with the pointillist technique and, thus, all develop a personal style.



Claude Monet, *Le bateau-atelier*, 1874, oil on canvas, 50,2 x 65,5 cm

## The French impressionists

Both the French impressionists and the neo-impressionists draw their inspiration, on the one hand from the bustling life in the Paris metropolis, and on the other from the beauty of nature. In contrast to the neo-impressionists, that seek the timeless essence of reality, the impressionists capture what they observe en plein air with quick brushstrokes. 'I paint directly from nature, whereby I attempt to render my impressions of the most transient effects', as Claude Monet formulates the motto of impressionism.

Helene Kröller-Müller's advisor, H.P. Bremmer, shows little appreciation of the movement, which he dismisses as 'too frivolous and too fleeting'. In his view, a depiction of reality based purely on visual perception provides an insufficient basis for painting. French impressionism is therefore not strongly represented in the museum's collection.

The solitary Monet in the collection is Monet's *Studio-boat*. This shows the boat that he has built to allow him to paint the surroundings from on the water. Monet got this idea from his colleague Charles-François Daubigny. This outdoor studio provides the perfect location from which to paint the effect of light and the intermittently cloudy skies on the water surface and the surrounding landscape.

Camille Pissarro paints impressionist landscapes in the vicinity of towns and villages around Paris, such as Pontoise and Montmartre. Later, however, he joins younger artists like Georges Seurat and Paul Signac and begins examining new techniques such as pointillism. He soon becomes a champion of neoimpressionism and, due to his senior age and experience, is seen as the 'father' of the group.



Paul Gabriël, *Il vient de loin*, circa 1887, oil on canvas, 67 x 100 cm

## The Dutch impressionists

Painters such as Isaac Israëls and George Hendrik Breitner capture the contemporary city life in the Netherlands. They paint in fluent, sketchy brushstrokes, without too many details. Israëls paints mainly themes from the nightlife in Amsterdam and female figures, such as factory workers and housemaids, and later also fashionable women including the exotic Mata Hari.

Amsterdam is also Breitner's working location. There he paints urban scenes and cityscapes of the Dam, the Damrak and the Rokin, but also of districts outside the city centre, such as the Jordaan. With his paintings of labourers, housewives and mongrels, he offers a pure and unadorned image of life in the street.

In *Il vient de loin* by Paul Gabriël, the modern age makes its first appearance in the polder: out of the distance a steam train approaches, cutting straight across the watery landscape, along a row of telegraph poles. This makes Gabriël one of the few painters who allow the reality of the emerging industrialisation to play a role in the previously idealized landscape. Together with *Landscape with a ditch*, also by Gabriël, *Il vient de loin* is one of the first paintings purchased by H.P. Bremmer for Helene Kröller-Müller.

The paintings by the Dutch impressionists are predominantly dark and subdued in tone. There is little experimentation with colour and the idea that rendering colour and light on the canvas could have a scientific basis is firmly rejected. Hence, neo-impressionism's well-considered points of departure are long regarded as unnatural.



Paul Signac , *La salle à manger*, Opus 152, 1886 - 1887, oil on canvas, 89,5 x 116,5 cm

## Signac, Cross and Luce

Although Seurat is the founder of neo-impressionism, Paul Signac is the movement's tireless spokesman and champion. He is one of the few people to get close to the rather private Seurat and it is also largely due to him that the ideas of the movement are disseminated after Seurat's untimely death. Signac becomes acquainted with Seurat and his work in the summer of 1884. Both artists are involved in the formation of the Société des Artistes Indépendants, an alternative group exhibition separate from the official Académie with its juries and prizes. Camille Pissarro joins the group in the autumn of 1885. The fact that the older and established Pissarro, one of the first impressionists, becomes a convert to the new ideas gives neo-impressionism an important stimulus. It is also Pissarro who provides the most concise characterization of the movement as the new 'scientific' neo-impressionism, as opposed to the old 'romantic' impressionism. Signac's early work is impressionist and strongly influenced by Monet. But with his *La salle à manger* he has created one of the icons of neo-impressionism. The painting demonstrates Signac's interest in the effects of colour contrasts. The main pairs of colours are yellow and blue and green and orange. Signac has not painted a lively scene here. The three figures in the painting are motionless and introverted, they do not communicate. Reality appears to be brought to a standstill.

Edmond Henry Cross is also one of the original Indépendants and he continues to exhibit at the Société throughout his life. Like Signac, he also settles on the Mediterranean coast, where they often paint similar subjects. *Étude pour Le Ranelagh: Parc avec figures* is, however, a typical Parisian scene of people relaxing in a park. The bright, cheerful colours are characteristic of Cross.

Maximilien Luce is raised in a working-class district of Montparnasse. His interest in the life of the common man remains constant throughout his career. He makes his debut at the Indépendants exhibition in 1887. Although his paintings of working-class districts like Montmartre rarely contain figures, the factories and smoking chimneys evoke an image of the heavy and monotonous toil of the labourers in the service of the more privileged classes.



Jan Toorop, *Sea*, 1899, oil on canvas, 46 x 50,5 cm

## The Netherlands: Toorop, Bremmer, Aarts, Vijlbrief, Gestel, Sluijters

Jan Toorop plays a vital role in the spread of neo-impressionism in the Netherlands. He sees Seurat's work at the Indépendants in Paris in 1884 and is the only Dutch member of the progressive Belgian artists' group Les XX. In 1891 Toorop settles in Katwijk aan Zee, where he is visited frequently by avant-garde artists from home and abroad, including Henry van de Velde and Théo Van Rysselberghe. Toorop paints the sea, an important theme to him, at different times of the day and in different seasons. The soft colours and fine pointillism in these paintings are not based on a system, but are chosen purely for their aesthetic, calming effect. An exhibition by Les XX is held at the Haagsche Kunstkring in The Hague in 1892. This also includes four paintings by Georges Seurat, who died the previous year. The exhibition has a strong influence on a group of painters in Leiden and The Hague, including H.P. Bremmer, Johan Aarts and Jan Vijlbrief.

Bremmer paints pointillist still lifes and landscapes in the period 1893-1895, after which he limits himself to painting in his free time. He devotes his attention to teaching art and becomes Helene Kröller-Müller's advisor. Aarts works in the vicinity of The Hague and Leiden. His *Farm in the dune district* derives from one of his walks around Leiden. Jan Vijlbrief paints the same subject, even from the same vantage point. And yet the atmosphere is very different: the painting by Aarts is bright and summery, while Vijlbrief's is more subdued.

Leo Gestel sees the work of Seurat and Signac in Paris as a young artist in 1904. As with the rest of the Dutch artists, his use of pointillism is rather unorthodox. Gestel, Jan Sluiter and Piet Mondriaan together constitute the group of Amsterdam luminists, which has its heyday around 1911. Gestel's *Landscape near Montfoort* is the most distinct work from his early luminist period, with strong yellow and orange colours next to blue and purple. Sluiter paints factories and sawmills on the outskirts of Amsterdam in bold and varied, somewhat dark brushstrokes.



Théo Van Rysselberghe, *Portrait of Maria Van Rysselberghe-Monnom*, 1892, oil on canvas, 186 x 97 cm

## Belgium: Van de Velde, Van Rysselberghe en Lemmen

The Association des XX is founded in Belgium in 1883. The twenty artists it comprises turn their backs on what they perceive as the festering cultural traditions and sometimes even harbour anarchistic sympathies. The annual exhibitions of Les XX in Brussels, where foreign artists also show their work, become a platform for the avant-garde.

Georges Seurat exhibits his monumental figure piece *Un Dimanche après-midi sur l'île de la grande Jatte* in 1887. Seurat's new style draws a mixed reception in Brussels, but Les XX is wildly enthusiastic. In Belgium the term *vingtisme* is even briefly used as a synonym for neo-impressionism. Henry van de Velde sees Seurat's work for the first time at Les XX in 1887 and begins experimenting with pointillism. In *Twilight* he portrays a tranquil, timeless image of rural life, a theme that recurs frequently in his work. In 1892 Van de Velde bids farewell to painting. He devotes himself to applied art and architecture and later becomes the architect of the Kröller-Müller Museum.

Théo Van Rysselberghe, one of the founders of Les XX, achieves success by applying the pointillist technique to the genre of the portrait. In the absence of any commissions, he initially makes portraits of his family members, but the elegant paintings soon become popular among the bourgeoisie. After 1895 Van Rysselberghe gradually turns away from neo-impressionism. The systematic nature of the style is becoming an obstacle to his personal expression. This ultimately leads to a falling-out with his friend Paul Signac.

And Georges Lemmen, who makes pointillist work for a few years under the influence of Seurat and Van Rysselberghe, also eventually finds the style too deliberate and restrictive. But before then, he does make several typical neo-impressionist river views of the Thames, with accompanying misty atmosphere and the subtle transition between sky and water.



Henry van de Velde, *Woman reading in the sun (Jeanne Biart)*, 1892, pastel on paper, 48 x 54 cm

## Drawings: Thorn Prikker, Toorop, Van de Velde

Neo-impressionism is primarily associated with painting and with oil on canvas. But artists also experiment with drawing.

From 1889 onwards, Dutch artist Johan Thorn Prikker spends his summers in the Belgian town of Visé, where he makes about thirty drawings. In 1904 he sends four drawings to his friend H.P. Bremmer. He refers to them as 'sun moments' and also mentions that they were made in the morning and in the afternoon. In order to concentrate fully on rendering the light, Thorn Prikker selects simple, rural subjects, with no figures. His drawings are composed of swirling patterns of coloured chalk lines. While Thorn Prikker does not adhere to the strict neo-impressionist theory, he does use complementary colours to achieve more contrast.

Thorn-Prikker's drawings demonstrate an affinity to those of Jan Toorop. In the years 1904-1907 Toorop makes a series of drawings of farm labourers in the Walcheren in Zeeland. The figures and surrounding landscape are made up of countless parallel, and sometimes overlapping chalk lines. Toorop describes the glow of the evening sun by using yellow, orange and light green side by side in the figures and the tall haystacks on the land.

Henry van de Velde experiments with pastels to achieve an 'optical blending' of colours. Even when applied in several layers, the pastel never mixes together on the paper. Thus the blending occurs in the eye of the observer. *Woman reading in the sun* is composed of parallel lines, mostly in blue and orange. By colouring in smaller areas with a lighter, contrasting colour, Van de Velde allows these to light up in the glaring sun.



The logo for Kröller-Müller, featuring the name in white text on a blue square background with a white shadow effect.

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