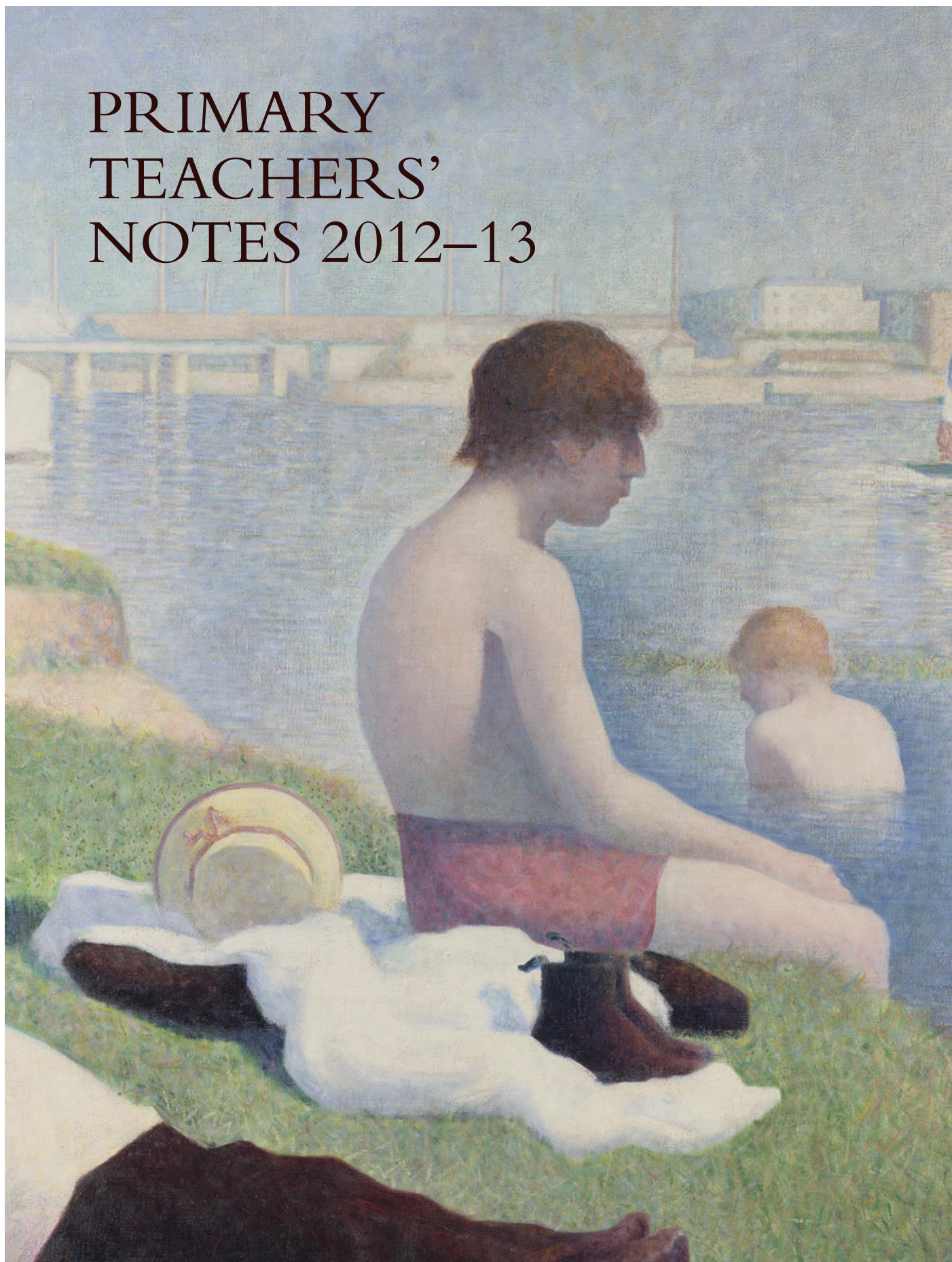


PRIMARY
TEACHERS'
NOTES 2012–13



BATHERS AT ASNIÈRES

1884

OIL ON CANVAS
201 x 300 CM

GEORGES SEURAT



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WHAT CAN YOU SEE?

Young men swim and relax on the banks of a river on a hazy summer's day. It is the 1880s and the river is the Seine, which runs through the French capital, Paris.

The scene shows a stretch of the river between Asnières and Courbevoie to the north-west of the city, with the factories and smoking chimneys of Clichy in the background. The river is crossed by two bridges, one directly behind the other. On closer inspection a steam train can be glimpsed roaring across the railway bridge.

The slice of land on the right of the painting is the tip of an island called La Grande Jatte, which Seurat focused on in another large-scale painting, *A Sunday afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–6, Art Institute of Chicago).

In the foreground the reclining man wears the long linen jacket and bowler hat of a foreman. The other young men are in varying states of undress, piles of clothing lying on the river bank. We cannot see the facial expressions of the men and boys and they are not in conversation, with the possible exception of the boy in the red hat on the right who cups his hands to his mouth – perhaps he is calling to someone out of sight.

On the far right a brown scull just enters the picture. Further into the centre a small green boat is being moved along by a man punting. The passengers are a man in a top hat and a lady with a parasol.

The painting is divided on a clear diagonal axis, which Seurat has used to differentiate the land from the water and sky. Verticals are created by the factory chimneys, and horizontals by the bridge. The men, with their hunched shoulders and rounded backs, provide curves. Seurat has sliced off the bottom of the nearest figure's trousers and shoes – a device that emphasises that the scene continues beyond the frame.

CITY OR COUNTRY?

As Seurat worked on this painting, urban development was proceeding at a rapid pace. The Industrial Revolution across Europe, the advancement of the railways and the decline of the agricultural sector resulted in a large migration of the workforce from the countryside to the cities. People came seeking opportunities in business and manual labour. The population of Paris doubled from 1 million in 1850 to 2 million in 1877.

It was not just the inner city which changed dramatically. Following the rebuilding of central Paris under Baron Haussmann in the 1850s and 60s, the cost of rent increased drastically. At the same time big industrial companies were established outside the city and commuter train fares for workers were slashed from 4.2 francs to a single franc. For these reasons, many of the lower classes were encouraged to move out to the suburbs.

Asnières had been a centre of leisure pursuits for the middle classes since 1837 when the building of the railway bridge made it easily accessible from the city centre. Now, in the mid-1880s, it was less of a peaceful haven. The factories in the background would have been noisy and smelly, and the river would probably have become polluted.

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE?

The clothes belonging to the men on the riverbank are all similar: white shirts, brown trousers, bowler and straw hats, and elastic-sided boots. It is unlikely that the men work in the distant factories because their clothes are clean and they are not in the standard-issue blue overalls, caps and hobnail boots. Instead their uniform suggests that they are clerical staff or skilled workers from Asnières enjoying a tranquil moment of rest and relaxation on the river bank.

The only woman in the picture can be found in the green boat, hidden behind a parasol. It was common for the

middle and upper classes to protect their skin from sun damage. However, it may also be no coincidence that the parasol blocks her view of the workers on the bank. She and her companion, a gentleman in a top hat, relax while being punted down the river.

HOW WAS IT MADE?

Composition

Bathers at Asnières is on the scale of a traditional history painting, yet it depicts a scene of everyday life – more often the subject of smaller easel paintings. Seurat completed a number of oil sketches in preparation for the painting. Some were painted on the banks of the Seine. Like many artists throughout the 19th century, Seurat took full advantage of the technical advances being made in the manufacture of artists' materials. Ready-mixed oil paint in tubes allowed him to work quickly outdoors, recording the effects of light and atmosphere.

While the scene is recognisable as the area around Asnières, the poses of the main figures were contrived. Seurat drew each of the figures from life in his studio, intentionally echoing the traditional stock poses of older artists like Flandrin and Ingres in the triangular seated figure and the reclining man in the foreground.

Seurat used his sketches and drawings to construct his final composition. He had many changes of mind; the reclining figure in the middle ground, the rowing boat and the scull were all added later.

Style

Seurat was increasingly experimental with his application of paint. A new style of flat paintbrush enabled Seurat to develop the *balayé* technique, where the brush is used to apply colours using strokes in a crisscross formation. These strokes become smaller as they approach the horizon. This technique is not used across the whole painting, but can be seen in the foreground, suggesting the flickering play of sunlight over the blades of grass.

Bathers at Asnières is often mistaken for a pointillist painting. Pointillism is a painting technique developed by Seurat, based on colour theory and the use of complementary colours in particular. A painting is created using countless tiny touches of pure colour, placed in close proximity to each other. When viewed at a distance, the human eye fuses the individual dots together into areas of solid colour. In fact, Seurat did not develop this technique until after he finished making this painting – though pointillist technique is evident in the red hat worn by the boy on the right, which he reworked at a later date.

Colour

Seurat had a special interest in optics and the science of colour, particularly the writings of the chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul. Sir Isaac Newton first arranged the colours of the spectrum in a circle, placing complementaries opposite each other. Complementaries are pairs of colours which cancel each other out when mixed, to produce white if they are coloured lights and grey if they are coloured paints. This circle arrangement is now known as the colour

wheel. Chevreul stated that complementary colours, opposites on the colour wheel, enhanced each other when placed side-by-side.

The use of complementary contrasts can be seen everywhere in the picture, from small brushstrokes to larger areas of colour. For example, in the predominantly green riverbank, there are strokes of the complementary colours pink and green, and also some bright yellow and violet, and orange and blue.

Seurat brings out the contrasts of lightness and darkness. This is seen throughout the painting, most strikingly in the light and dark haloes around the boys in the centre and at the right of the picture. Next to the lit sides of the boys' bodies, the water has been consciously darkened, and next to the shadowed sides it has been lightened.

HOW WAS IT RECEIVED?

Seurat submitted *Bathers at Asnières* to the Paris Salon in 1884, France's major art exhibition. Traditionally, paintings exhibited at the Paris Salon were large and depicted heroic subjects from history or the classical past. Seurat's painting was rejected by the jury – but why?

Seurat was not the only artist to paint modern subjects on a large scale, so it cannot have been on these grounds alone. Perhaps what confused the judges was the reference to history painting in the poses and arrangement of the figures, combined with his experimental use of colour. In addition, in place of animated figures expertly modelled using smooth brushstrokes typical of Salon paintings, Seurat's figures are isolated, relatively flat and made up of crisscross brushstrokes.

After rejection from the Paris Salon, Seurat joined forces with other artists to form the Groupe des Artistes Indépendants, where artists could present their work to the general public without going through the official selective channels.

WHAT WAS ITS INFLUENCE?

Following Seurat's lead other artists painted the area around Asnières in 1887–8. All of them shared Seurat's fascination with stylistic innovation as well as the impact of encroaching urbanisation. It was not until many years after his death in 1891 at the age of just 32 that Seurat's influence was fully acknowledged and that *Bathers at Asnières* received the iconic status it holds today.

Seurat is now regarded as one of the most important Post-Impressionist painters. Post-Impressionism broadly embraces artists working in a variety of styles in France in the 1880s, including Van Gogh and Gauguin. Post-Impressionist painters moved beyond the Impressionist interest in capturing visual phenomena, and optically accurate appearances, in favour of something grander and more decorative, exploring the symbolic or expressive possibilities of representation.

Seurat was among the first artists to make a systematic use of colour theory, and his technical innovations influenced many of his peers. Seurat brought a new awareness of the surface qualities of painting, and of decorative effects, thereby contributing to the development of abstraction.

USING THE PICTURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

TAKE ONE PICTURE

The National Gallery promotes the use of a single painting for cross-curricular teaching and learning through the Take One Picture programme. The scheme champions engagement with and exploration of a National Gallery painting as inspiration for enrichment of learning through making meaningful connection both inside and outside the classroom.

STARTING POINTS

Before looking at the painting

- With the pupils eyes closed introduce some sounds and key vocabulary from the painting and use 'shared imagining' to build the scene in the children's imagination. 'There is a man sitting by a river...'
- Invite the pupils to jump into the imagined scene. Where would they go? What else can they see, smell and hear?

Strategies to support looking

- Cut the picture in two and only show one half of the image. Ask the pupils to use what they can see to imagine what might appear on the other side of the riverbank.
- Play 'spot the difference' between one of Seurat's preparatory sketches and the final painting.

Open questions to initiate dialogue

- How are the people in the painting different/similar? Who stands out? Why?
- Who would you most like to talk to? What might you ask them? What might their reply be?
- If you could ask Seurat a question what would it be? What might his response be?
- What does the painting remind you of?
- Why might someone want to buy this painting?

LINES OF ENQUIRY

Lines of enquiry begin with themes in the painting and extend to make meaningful connections with broad learning experiences. Projects that enrich learning will emerge as you explore the different contexts and possibilities that the painting creates for you and your pupils.

• Changing landscapes

Compare how the landscape represented has changed from the time of the painting to how it looks today. Explore how industrialisation changed the landscape in Europe during the 1800s and how it continues to affect our environment. How has the environment changed in your local area? Can you predict what it will look like in the future? How is industrialisation and globalisation affecting other countries today?

• Transport: form and function

Investigate modes of transport represented in the painting. How does the design and form of a vehicle relate to its function? Compare vehicles used for leisure and those used for industry and commuting. What will the transport of the future be like?

• Character

What might the people in the painting be thinking and feeling? What might have happened in their lives in the minutes, hours or weeks before or after the moment captured? How might this be expressed in different media (poetry, dance, art, music, ICT)?

• Dress and status

One of the keys to unlocking the painting is the dress of the people. Do the same relationships between status and clothing exist today as they did then? Explore how clothing style is influenced by function.

• Family life and change

Family life underwent great change in the 19th century due to the industrialisation of working lives and the modernisation of society. How did people live then? How have more recent changes in society affected the way people live?

• Light and colour

Explore the science behind colour and light. Investigate colour combinations. How does colour affect us? How is colour used in our lives today?

WEB LINKS

www.nationalgallery.org.uk

www.vam.ac.uk/page/0-9/19th-century-fashion

The Victoria and Albert Museum's resource on 19th-century fashion

www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/onlinestuff/subjects/transport.aspx

The Science Museum's resource on transport development and design

www.sdc.org.uk/en/education/colour-experience/index.cfm

The Society of Dyers and Colourists' website on the science of colour

RESOURCES

A printed reproduction of the painting can be purchased from National Gallery shops, by mail order at mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk or by telephone on 020 7747 5958. A copy will be given to teachers attending the Gallery's Continuing Professional Development courses 2012/13.