

One of the most influential figures in the history of modern art is also one of the least known: Félix Fénéon, a French art critic, editor, publisher, dealer, collector, and anarchist who was active in Paris during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fénéon tirelessly advocated for avant-garde art, literature, and politics, working behind the scenes for more than five decades.

Fénéon began his career as a critic, contributing to dozens of progressive journals in the 1880s and 1890s. In 1886, he coined the term Neo-Impressionism to describe the work of Georges-Pierre Seurat and Paul Signac, the first of many modern artists he would ardently champion. In the early twentieth century he became a dealer and engaged with a new generation of artists, signing Henri Matisse to his first gallery contract in 1909, and giving the Italian Futurists their breakthrough exhibition in 1912. As a patron, Fénéon amassed an extraordinary collection of paintings by Seurat, Signac, Matisse, Pierre Bonnard, Amedeo Modigliani, and many others. He was also one of the first European collectors of art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, and he endeavored to bring new recognition to such works. His anarchism—for which he was arrested, in connection with a politically motivated bombing, in 1894—shaped his belief that art could play a fundamental role in the formation of a more just and harmonious world.

This exhibition brings together a selection of outstanding works that Fénéon owned and promoted—including a hypnotic portrait by Signac in which this enigmatic figure seems to calmly stride through the roiling, transformational currents of his era.

Organized by Starr Figura, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Isabelle Cahn, Senior Curator, Musée d'Orsay, Paris; and Philippe Peltier, former Head, Océania and Insulindia Unit, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris; with Anna Blaha, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This exhibition is one of a trio of complementary exhibitions devoted to Fénéon that are organized by The Museum of Modern Art, the Musées d'Orsay et de l'Orangerie, Paris, and the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris.

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