
FÉNÉON AND NEO-IMPRESSIONISM

As a young art critic active between 1883 and 1893, Fénéon wrote reviews that shaped the emergence of the modern avant-garde. In an 1886 essay, he coined the term “Neo-Impressionism” to describe the art of Georges-Pierre Seurat, Paul Signac, and their peers. He was the first critic to articulate the significance of their pointillist technique, which involved composing images with tiny dots of distinct colors. Based on contemporary scientific theories about the optical and emotional effects of different colors and their pairings, pointillist compositions coalesce into cohesive scenes when viewed from a distance. “Take two steps away,” Fénéon wrote, “and all these versicolored spots melt into undulating, luminous masses.”

Fénéon contrasted the techniques of the Neo-Impressionists with those of their predecessors, the Impressionists; while the Impressionists’ bravura brushstrokes produced transient, “blink-of-an-eye” effects, pointillism lent compositions the appearance of stillness and permanence. The Neo-Impressionists’ search for a more timeless and science-based approach to painting was linked to their faith in progressive social values. They believed that aesthetic harmony could be powerful enough to guide viewers toward an equivalent social harmony.

FÉNÉON AND ANARCHISM

During his first years in Paris, Fénéon led a double life. Initially moving there in 1881 to work as a clerk at the Ministry of War, he soon became active in anarchist circles, contributing art criticism (anonymously or under pseudonyms) to various anarchist journals. But in April 1894, Fénéon's underground activities became public knowledge when he was arrested following a slew of politically motivated bombings. Twenty-nine other suspected anarchists were rounded up by the police in a major crackdown. During the so-called Trial of the Thirty, Fénéon famously pitted his wit against the prosecutor—to the great amusement of the courtroom audience and press—and was narrowly acquitted.

Anarchism flourished during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in France, a period often referred to as the Belle Époque. Though celebrated for its extraordinary cultural achievements, the era saw horrendous economic devastation for the working class, instilling in many a profound distrust of state institutions. Anarchists like Fénéon and his artist friends Paul Signac and Maximilien Luce believed that the dissolution of the government, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie would allow social harmony, economic fairness, and artistic freedom to prevail.

SELECTIONS FROM “NEWS IN THREE LINES,” FÉLIX FÉNÉON’S ANONYMOUS DAILY COLUMN FOR *LE MATIN*, 1906

Scheid, of Dunkirk, fired three times at his wife. Since he missed every shot, he decided to aim at his mother-in-law, and connected.

The May Day celebration in Lorient was noisy, but not a hint of violence gave the slightest cause for police intervention.

Prematurely jealous, J. Boulon, of Parc-Saint-Maur, pumped a revolver shot in the thigh of his fiancée, Germaine S.

Through a clever game of alternating resignations, the mayor and the town council of Brive have delayed the building of schools.

His head injury was not serious, believed Kremer, of Pont-à-Mousson, who continued working for a few hours, then dropped dead.

M. Jules Kerzerho was president of a gymnastics club, and yet he was run over trying to jump into a streetcar in Rueil.

“I could have done worse!” exultantly cried the murderer Lebret, sentenced at Rouen to hard labor for life.

The salt makers of the Pesquiers plant in Hyères would like to add some flavor to their work. To this end, they are going on strike.

“If my candidate loses, I will kill myself,” M. Bellavoine, of Fresquienne, Seine-Inférieure, had declared. He killed himself.

FÉNÉON AND ART FROM AFRICA, OCEANIA, AND THE AMERICAS

By 1920, Fénéon's collection of modern European paintings was sharing his crowded home with an equally burgeoning collection of objects from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. As one visitor explained, "the walls of the entrance hall were cluttered with frames that almost touched each other. A Fauve still-life by Matisse [and] landscapes by Bonnard and Signac . . . emerged from behind a wild assortment of Negro sculpture." (At the time, the term "Negro art" was used by Western collectors and critics to refer in an undifferentiated way to the arts of Africa and Oceania.)

Most of the works in Fénéon's collection originated in the then French colonies of Côte d'Ivoire, Middle Congo, and Gabon. Fénéon was among an ever-widening circle of the European avant-garde who developed a passion for such objects in the early-twentieth century, and he took part in a system that removed them from their original contexts and often reduced them to exoticized items to be appropriated or admired by white artists and collectors. At the same time, he was an early and outspoken critic of colonialism and advocated for the value of these objects as artworks in their own right rather than as anthropological or ethnographic artifacts. In 1920, he commissioned a survey asking if "arts from remote places" belonged in art museums, rather than the ethnographic museums where they were then being shown. The published responses became one of the earliest inquiries into the way such works were understood in Europe.

FÉNÉON AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART

Fénéon surprised many of his friends when, in 1906, he took a position as a dealer at the prominent art gallery Bernheim-Jeune, where he was tasked with bringing avant-garde talent into the relatively conservative program. While the job may have initially seemed at odds with Fénéon's anti-capitalist anarchism, for him it was another way of affirming his commitment to modern painting.

Not long after arriving at Bernheim-Jeune, Fénéon signed contracts with his Neo-Impressionist friends, as well as with a new generation of artists including Kees van Dongen and, crucially, Henri Matisse, who were forging a radical style of vigorous brushwork and explosive color. "A good anarchist," one contemporary observed, "[Fénéon] planted Matisses among the bourgeoisie from the back room at Bernheim-Jeune as he might have planted bombs." In 1912, Fénéon staged the most sensational show of his career, "The Italian Futurist Painters." The Futurists' Paris debut, the exhibition drew huge crowds and established the group as a modernist force to be reckoned with.

Fénéon remained at Bernheim-Jeune until 1924, all the while continuing to collect art by his peers in Paris. On view here is a selection of works he was passionate about, whether as a dealer or as an ardent collector.