

The Scottish Seurat

by Kathryn Allan

Seated Boy with Straw Hat, Study for Bathers at Asnières, 1883-84 (Yale University Art Gallery)

<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/34001>

Seated Nude: Study for 'Une Baignade', 1883 (National Galleries of Scotland)

[Seated Nude: Study for 'Une Baignade' | National Galleries of Scotland](#)

Every year I visit Edinburgh on my birthday, the capital's galleries my destination. Last time, I was on the trail of the hidden Van Gogh – his until now secret rendering of self, of classified self-portrait kept safe in the space behind a painted peasant woman, discovered and soon to be uncovered. Until its full restoration, an x-ray made visible what lay on the painting's flipside. But, as magical as viewing the picture and glimpsing its stealth contents was, it was a small Seurat – a conté crayon study for his *Bathers at Asnières*, featuring quietly among some heavyweights in the National Galleries of Scotland's *A Taste for Impressionism* exhibition – that was the most affecting. I *believed* the small monochrome figure to have form; I could *sense* his weight, smaller in image but as convincing as mine, as he sat and I stood. Gravity was acting on us both.

The 'Scottish' Seurat (*Seated Nude: Study for 'Une Baignade'*) is a study for the central figure in *The Bathers* – a sister study, as it were, to *Seated Boy with Straw Hat*. Why is the latter so convincing of form? How does crayon become flesh?

Material – Acton tells us that Seurat, '*used a waxy, slightly greasy conté crayon on rough paper which conveyed the effect of light falling on the forms.*' (Acton, 2009, p.73) and the National Galleries of Scotland similarly explain he, '*made full use of the subtle tones which the medium allowed, as well as exploiting the rough texture of his chosen 'Ingres' brand of paper.*' (National Galleries of Scotland, 2020)

Interplay of space and form – Seurat uses tonal range exquisitely to describe both the figure's form and the space in which the figure sits. The lightest tones – the boy's shoulder, the front of

his hat, his shin from knee to ankle – come towards us, helping to convey his three-dimensional and a believability of form. The darkest tones recede – where the youth's back meets his seat, the flaccid, waiting leg muscle, the armpit, the anonymising dark tone of the face – and, with carefully rendered mid-tones joining light and dark together, help to describe his roundness. Form is held in space by a light tone – almost a crayoned glow ablaze about the figure – describing the space around and among the boy and physically separating him from the background.

This drawing informed Seurat's painting *Bathers at Asnières*. Here, use of material is once more critical to a three-dimensional reading. Acton explains, '*the brushstrokes are regularised so that it is quite clear where the water ends and the outline of his back begins.*' (Acton, 2009, p.72). And as we saw in the preparatory drawing, form and space interact similarly here too – dark and light tones convey human form, Acton's 'surrounding space' described behind and among the figures, e.g. in the duckweed, her 'spur of white' (Acton, 2009, p.74).

Seurat's rendering of form and space, in both the preparatory drawings and the final painting, I think coheres to create a convincing illusion of three dimensions.

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Bibliography

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