

Serra/Seurat. Drawings

- Dates: June 9 – September 6, 2022
 - Curators: Lucía Agirre, curator, Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, and Judith Benhamou, independent curator and art writer
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- Especially important in Seurat's drawings is the handmade paper he uses, which he 'brings to life' by allowing it to absorb exactly the right amount of crayon to create the lights, volumes, and contrasts that make him one of the masters of drawing.
 - Richard Serra also revels in his materials, such as the handmade Japanese paper that he employs in his *Ramble* drawings. Owing to its manufacturing process, the fibers create different 'accidents' so that no drawing is the same as any other.
 - Seurat was an artist for artists, as draftsman was and is admired by many of them, such Van Gogh, Signac, Picasso, Moore and even now Jasper Johns and Richard Serra. His drawings are now fetishized by these creators and the followers of their cults all around the world, the collectors.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Serra/Seurat. Drawings*, the exhibition that brings together a selection of 22 drawings by the late 19th-century master Georges Seurat, which in turn engage in dialogue with the drawings of Richard Serra, a great admirer of Seurat's and without a doubt one of the most outstanding artists of the present day. Despite the years that separate them, both artists are notable for working with drawing as an end in itself and taking it to new levels, imbuing it with innovative characteristics and extrapolating it to other areas of their work.

The drawings of Georges Seurat were highly valued by artists of his time like Maximilien Luce, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Signac, who described them in 1899 as "the most beautiful painter's drawings in existence," and they have continued to win appreciation from later artists like Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, Bridget Riley, and Richard Serra himself.

Seurat was able with very simple means to make appear shapes from the conte crayon darkness placed on the white paper. This is what Serra calls the weight of shapes. "The weight of the drawing derives not only from the number of layers of paintstick but mainly from the particular shape of the drawing. It is obvious – from Mantegna's Christ to Cézanne's apples – that shapes can imply weight, mass and volume".

Especially important in Seurat's drawings is the paper support he uses. He usually chooses a handmade French paper, Michallet, which is characterized by its irregularities, its heavy texture, and its undulations or crests, almost imperceptible to the naked eye but not to the crayon sliding over its surface. Besides the technical dexterity of the execution, it might be said that Seurat 'feels' the paper and brings it to life, allowing it to absorb exactly the right amount of crayon to create the lights, volumes, and contrasts that make him worthy to be considered one of the great masters of drawing.

This knowledge of the material which distinguishes the great artists was discovered by Richard Serra while he was studying with Josef Albers. He expressed it in these words:

“Once one understood the basic lesson that procedure was dictated by the material, you also realized that matter imposed its own form on form.”

Richard Serra thus saw early on that sculpture is not subject only to carving, modeling, and casting, but that the materials have a great influence on the spatial experience they generate. He also gives drawing a transcendent quality, for besides using it as a means to other ends, he turns it into an autonomous language and applies new techniques, formats, and materials. In his *Ramble* drawings, a series he began in 2015, Serra, like Seurat, revels in his materials, such as the handmade Japanese paper whose manufacturing process makes the fibers create ‘accidents’ so that every sheet is different from the others. This means that no *Ramble* is the same as any other, both because of the manner in which the artist works on the paper and because of the way the paper reacts.

In the *Ramble* drawings, Serra uses two different methods of applying the litho crayon. The first is transfer, and the second direct marking on the sheet. In the first case, the amount of pressure determines a greater or lesser degree of transfer, and so what looks in some works like a light mist becomes a dark blur in others. Direct application meanwhile allows greater control over the amount of grease used on the paper, leading to a wide variety of results with a wealth of fascinating nuances.

Serra creates these works on a moderate scale, but still endows them with a certain monumentality by arranging 33 of the smallest *Ramble* drawings in a grid formed by three rows of eleven. With this configuration, the artist shares his creative process with the viewer, who is enabled to perceive the effects created by each impression on the unique sheets of paper.

An Essential Activity

As Serra himself explained in 1977: “Drawing is a concentration on an essential activity, and the credibility of the statement is totally within your hands. It’s the most direct, conscious space in which I work. I can observe my process from beginning to end, and at times sustain a continuous concentration. It’s replenishing. It’s one of the few conditions in which I can understand the source of my work.”

For Seurat too, drawing is an essential activity, a fact demonstrated by the late date at which he started to paint and the small number of his paintings by contrast with the hundreds of drawings he produced. His contemporary Paul Signac recognized and extolled his importance: “Seurat’s studies resulted in his well-considered and fertile theory of contrasts: a theory to which all his work was thereafter subjected. He applied it first to chiaroscuro: with the simplest of resources, the white of a sheet of Ingres paper and the black of a conté crayon, skillfully graded or contrasted, he executed some four hundred drawings, the most beautiful painters’ drawings in existence. Thanks to their perfect science of values, we can say that these blacks and whites are more colorful and brighter than many paintings.”

Seurat’s drawing and painting may appear to be two separate worlds, but his profound knowledge of color, which is fragmented when applied to his canvases, is reflected earlier in his black and white drawings. As

color is an effect of the light, an extensive knowledge of chromatic gradations and combinations allows him to illuminate the maximum darkness of black in the absence of color.

These words spoken by Serra in 2000 also stem from such a notion of black: "It's definitely a color. [...] As soon as you think of Seurat's drawings you think of black as a color." Georges Seurat is a master at illuminating both darkness and brightness, an even more complicated task as this effect is harder to achieve when there is less contrast. His almost pointillist use of the grain of the paper allows him on occasions to work with 'negative drawing'.

Constant Evolution

In this exhibition, viewers can appreciate the evolution of Seurat's drawings after his training at the Lehmann school, which he subsequently left, abandoning the 'traditional' path with it. He also left behind him the drawings he made during his military service, some with colored pencils, in his famous Brest sketchbooks, which marked the artist's development toward a definitive break with academicism and the beginning of his mature language.

The small drawings *Seated Couple* (*Couple Assis*, ca. 1881) and *In Shirt Sleeves* (*En bras de chemise*, ca. 1881), probably also from a sketchbook, show his attempts to break away from traditional delineation by means of diagonal hatching framed by short broken lines. In *Two-horse hitch* (*Attelage à deux chevaux*, 1882–83), he uses a tangle of brief movements to sketch out the main form of the two horses and the driver, occupying the whole sheet with similar strokes—but with crayon of less density—to create a continuum nuanced only by a change of direction in the execution and the concentration of material.

Somewhat similar is *The Lamp* (*La Lampe*, 1882–83), though the result is accentuated by making the neck and chin of the female figure disappear into the deep darkness of the crayon, allowing the lamp to frame her face and acquire presence even though hardly any light is projected on the rest of the scene. Seurat's drawing evolved vertiginously during his mature phase, as demonstrated not only by the Impressionist modernity of the black and white landscapes of this period, such as *The Edge of the Forest* [*Le Mur du chemin* (*La Forêt*), ca. 1883] or *Tree Trunks Reflected in Water* (*Homage to Stéphane Mallarmé*) [*Troncs d'arbres se reflétant dans l'eau* (*Hommage à Stéphane Mallarmé*), 1883–84], but also by his figures, reclining, seated, or walking down a moonlit path, like those of *Night Stroll* (*Promenoir*, ca. 1882).

Seurat continued experimenting and working on paper until the end of his brief career, as is clearly seen in his painting and palpable in works on display in the exhibition like *Study for A Summer Sunday on the Grande Jatte island: skirt detail* (*Étude pour Un Dimanche d'été sur l'île de la Grande Jatte: détail de jupe*, 1984–85) and *An Evening, Gravelines* (*Un Soir, Gravelines*, 1890). Seurat sketched this landscape rapidly, but without wasting the opportunity to create chiaroscuro and occupy the whole surface of the paper. The show ends with the beautiful scene of *The White Sail* (*Le voile blanche*, 1890), one of his last drawings, where the light emanates from a small sail that dominates the composition, filled by the artist with details as he uses every inch of the sheet. This connects with Richard Serra's *Ramble* drawings in a stimulating dialogue.

DIDAKTIKA

As part of the Didaktika project, the Museum designs educational areas, online content, and programs to complement the exhibitions, offering viewers tools and resources to increase their appreciation of the works on display.

The Didaktika Serra-Seurat. Drawings focuses on the mediums and materials used by artists Richard Serra and Georges Seurat, as for both, the choice of paper—texture and size—, the drawing tools, even the exclusive use of black, are essential.

Thus, in this space, visitors will find samples of different papers, of various textures and thicknesses, ranging from old to contemporary, that they will be able to experience through touch. A selection of fragments from documentaries and interviews screened in two areas will also highlight Seurat's influence on other contemporary artists and the importance of drawing for him.

Exhibition-related Programs

Introductory Talk (June 7)

Exhibition curators Judith Benhamou and Lucía Agirre will talk about the exhibition, a celebration of drawing through two masters from the History of Art.

Shared Reflections*

Visits led by Museum professionals from the Departments of Curatorial and Education offering different perspectives of the pieces in the exhibitions.

- Curatorial Vision (June 15). Lucía Agirre, Museum and exhibition curator, will guide participants on a tour of the show.
- Key Concepts (June 29). Luz Maguregui, Museum Education Coordinator, will discuss the general and didactic keys of the exhibition.

*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

Creative Session: Hand-made Paper (June 30)

Master paper-maker and engineer Juan Barbé Arrillaga, will share the craft of making paper in this beginner's workshop for adults.

CATALOGUE

The exhibition will be accompanied by an illustrated catalogue featuring the works in the show, as well as three essays contributed by the exhibition curators about Georges Seurat's and Richard Serra's consideration of drawing as an artistic end in itself, imbuing it with innovative characteristics and taking it to new levels.

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Cover images:

Georges Seurat

Tree Trunks Reflected in Water (Homage to Stéphane Mallarmé) [*Troncs d'arbres reflétés dans l'eau (Hommage à Stéphane Mallarmé)*], 1883–84

Conté crayon on paper

22 x 32 cm.

Permanent loan to Hahnloser/Jaeggli Foundation, Villa Flora, Winterthur

For more information:

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For more information, you can get in touch with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao press area at tel. +34 944 359 008 or email media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus

Georges Seurat

Two-Horse hitch (Attelage à deux chevaux), 1882–83

Conté crayon on paper

23 x 30 cm

Musée de la Faïence et des Beaux-arts Frédéric-Blandin, Nevers

Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais / Gérard Blot



Georges Seurat

The Lamp (La Lampe), 1882–83

Conté crayon on paper

30.5 x 24 cm

Henry Moore Family Collection



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Georges Seurat

Vagabond, ca. 1883

Conté crayon on paper

31.1 × 20.7 cm

Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest



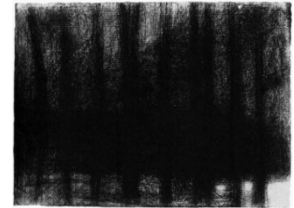
Georges Seurat

Tree Trunks Reflected in Water (Homage to Stéphane Mallarmé) [*Troncs d'arbres se reflétant dans l'eau (Hommage à Stéphane Mallarmé)*], 1883-84

Conté crayon on paper

22.7 × 31 cm

Villa Flora, Winterthur; permanent loan to Hahnloser/Jaeggli Foundation, Winterthur.



Georges Seurat

Reclining Man (Study for "Bathers at Asnières") [*L'homme Couché (Étude pour "une Baignade, Asnières")*], 1883-84

Conté crayon on paper

24.5 × 31.5 cm

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Sammlung Beyeler

Photo: Peter Schibli



Georges Seurat

The White Sail (La voile blanche), 1890

Conté crayon on paper

25 × 33 cm

Private collection



Richard Serra

Ramble 3-51, 2015

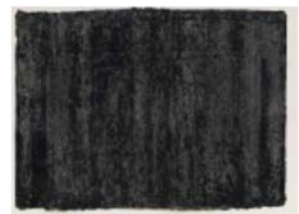
Litho crayon and pastel powder on handmade paper

54.6 × 74.9 cm

Collection of the artist

Artwork © Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Photo: Robert McKeever



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Richard Serra

Ramble 3-54, 2015

Litho crayon and pastel powder on handmade paper

50,2 x 64,1 cm

Collection of the artist

Artwork © Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Photo: Robert McKeever



Richard Serra

Ramble 4-26, 2015

Litho crayon and pastel powder on handmade paper

90,2 x 93,3 cm

Collection of the artist

Artwork © Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Photo: Robert McKeever



Richard Serra

Installation view *Ramble Drawings*, 2015

33 works, Litho crayon and pastel powder on handmade paper

Collection of the artist

Artwork © Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Photo: Zarko Vijatovic

