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Madeline's Madeleine

The cast of "Sunday in the Park with George" Photo credit: Matthew Murphy

By Madeline Lissner

director at AAP

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I fell in love with visiting museums as a seven-year-old on her first art history assignment: pretend that you have walked into the painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte (Un Dimanche Apres-Midi a Î'Ile de la Grande Jatte)* (1884-6) by Georges Seurat and write a story about the individuals in the park. I stepped into the painting, and it came to life.

The latest Broadway revival of the musical "Sunday in the Park with George", based on the book by James Lapin with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, finished its short run at New York's Hudson Theatre on Sunday. It tells the story of how Seurat—played by Jake Gyllenhaal—watched and sketched people relaxing in the park at weekends before returning to his dimly-lit studio to obsessively work on the painting. Audience members could relive their own memories of childhood wonder as the figures depicted in the painting broke free of the rigid stances they had held for the past 131 years.

The charm of the musical, which was heralded by The New York Times as one of Sondheim's "richest and most intricately composed scores", begins and ends with the painting—which the audience is reacquainted with like an old friend. "Any time

I bring visitors on a tour of the museum… seeing this work is a moment of recognition," says Allison Perelman, a research associate in the European Painting and Sculpture Department of The Art Institute of Chicago, which received the work as a gift in the 1920s. "Even if they don't know French art, everyone knows this work."
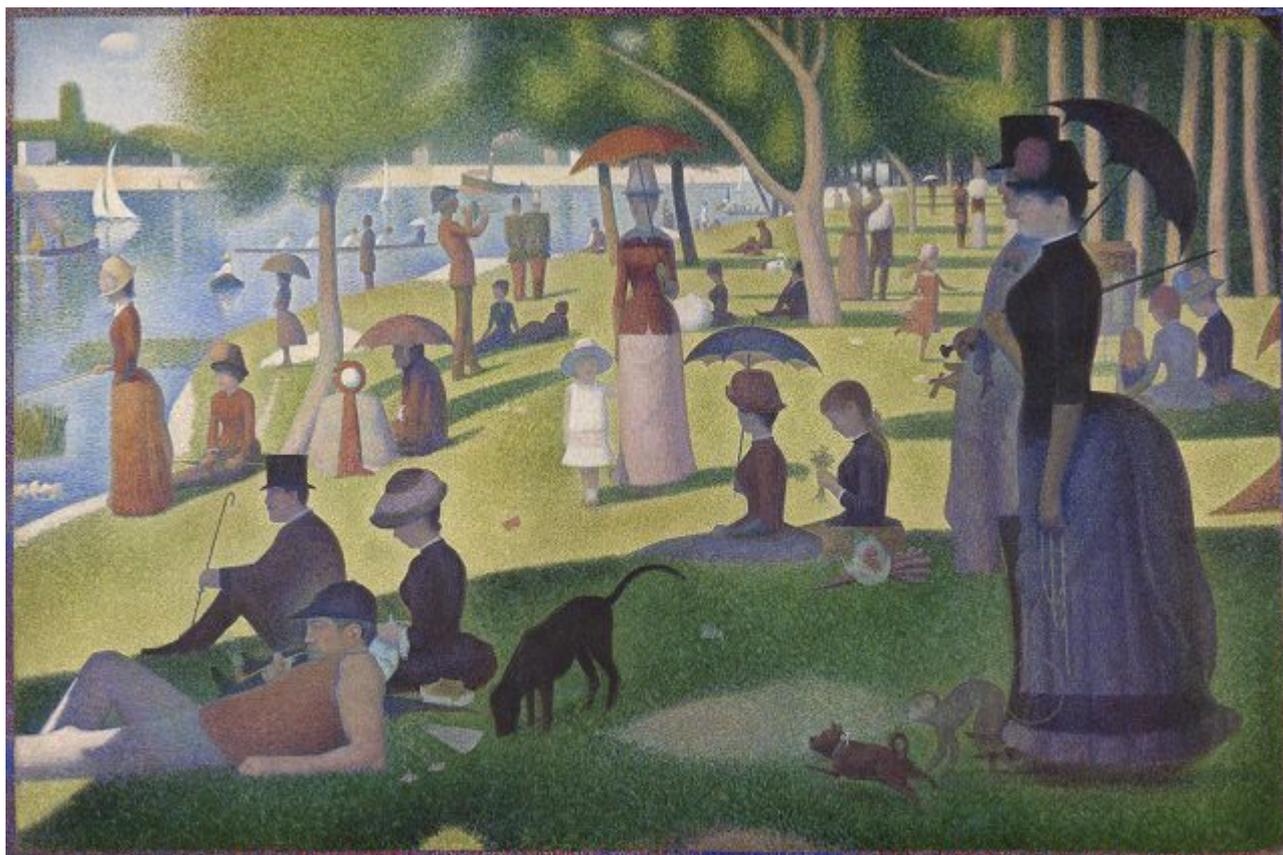
George Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884* (1884/86), painted border (1888/89). The Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection

I sat wide-eyed and happy for the full two-and-a-half hours of the show, transported to the years between 1884 and 1886 when Seurat worked on the painting. As a teenager, I had visited the Parisian suburban island Île de la Grande Jatte, which Seurat depicts in the painting and where the musical is set. I remember marveling at the similarities in the trees, in the mothers and daughters and the sunbathers more than a century after Seurat created the 28 drawings, 28 panels and three canvases that informed his Pointillist painting.

A sunbather at Île de la Jatte in 2006. Photo credit: Madeline Lissner

While the musical applies a shiny gloss to the painting, creating comical characters such as an American tourist couple and flirtatious female shopkeepers, the story is ultimately about the struggles of an artist to complete his masterpiece in a society in which his style is not only unaccepted, but also shunned. It is also about the detached relationships between the artist and his family, acquaintances and lover.

"The psychological isolation…in the painting was definitely recognized when Seurat first exhibited, and probably more acutely in 1886 than today," Perelman says. "So many people today see this lovely colorful work of this appealing scene but Seurat and the Neo-Impressionists were compared to cold-hearted scientists, not working in studios but in laboratories."

In childhood, we see only glee in the painting. As adults at the musical, we are filled with whimsy and nostalgia but cannot avoid the fact that a Sunday of leisure does not mask our unchanging troubles: from class differences to the problems of industrialized cities, from fractured relationships to our personal quests for purpose and fulfillment.

Jake Gyllenhaal in "Sunday in the Park with George" Photo credit: Matthew Murphy