This is a catalogue for the first exhibition to pay tribute to the great Félix Fénéon (1861–1944), the great influential French art critic, publisher, dealer, curator, collector, and anarchist. Though largely forgotten today, always discreetly behind the scenes in his own day, he had an extraordinary impact on the development of modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and played a key role in the careers of leading artists from Georges Seurat and Paul Signac to Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse. The centerpiece of the exhibition will be Signac’s portrait of Fénéon, Opus 217: Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angels, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890—an important acquisition to MoMA’s collection. Though largely forgotten today, always discreetly behind the scenes in his own day, he had an extraordinary impact on the development of modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and played a key role in the careers of leading artists from Georges Seurat and Paul Signac to Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse. The centerpiece of the exhibition will be Signac’s portrait of Fénéon, Opus 217: Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angels, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890—an important acquisition to MoMA’s collection.
Félix Fénéon

THE ANARCHIST
and
THE AVANT-GARDE

STARR FIGURA, ISABELLE CAHN,
and PHILIPPE PELTIER

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
NEW YORK
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The Museum of Modern Art is honored to present Félix Fénéon: The Anarchist and the Avant-Garde—From Signac to Matisse and Beyond, the first exhibition devoted to the influential French art critic, editor, publisher, dealer, collector, and anarchist Félix Fénéon (1861–1944). Though largely unknown today and always discreetly behind the scenes in his own era, Fénéon played a key role in the careers of leading artists from Georges-Pierre Seurat and Paul Signac to Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse. In addition to championing and collecting the work of these and other artists he befriended in the burgeoning Paris art world from the 1880s through the 1930s, Fénéon 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. As a fervent anarchist during a period of dramatic social change and political turmoil, he believed that art could play a fundamental role in the formation of a more harmonious, egalitarian world.

The exhibition is produced in collaboration with the Musées d’Orsay et de l’Orangerie and the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac in Paris, and it is the third in a trio of complementary exhibitions devoted to Fénéon in 2019–20. We are grateful to Laurence des Cars, President, Musées d’Orsay et de l’Orangerie; Cécile Debray, Director, Musée de l’Orangerie; and Stéphane Martin, former President, Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, for making possible this fruitful partnership among our respective institutions.

In Paris, the first iteration of the exhibition took place at the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac from May 28 through September 29, 2019, and it focused primarily on Fénéon’s engagement with non-Western art. The second iteration took place at the Musée de l’Orangerie from October 16, 2019, through January 27, 2020, and it focused primarily on Fénéon’s engagement with European art. The MoMA exhibition, on view from March 22 through July 25, 2020, combines, distills, and augments elements from both of these exhibitions to present a concentrated survey of Fénéon’s multifaceted career. The two Paris exhibitions were organized by Isabelle Cahn, Senior Curator of Paintings, Musée d’Orsay, and Philippe Peltier, former Head, Oceania and Insulindia Unit, Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac. Starr Figura, Curator of Drawings and Prints at The Museum of Modern Art, organized the New York presentation and this catalogue, working closely with Cahn and Peltier and with curatorial assistant Anna Hlubka.

The idea for a Fénéon exhibition was first suggested some twenty years ago by Françoise Cachin, then Director of the Musées de France. Cachin—the
granddaughter of Paul Signac, Fénéon’s great friend and portraitist—had edited a selection of Fénéon’s art criticism in 1966. Also familiar with the publications by Fénéon’s pioneering biographers, Jean Paulhan and Jean U. Halperin, she understood that Fénéon’s support for the artistic innovations of the late nineteenth century made him a crucial figure in the history of the Musée d’Orsay (now the Musées d’Orsay et de l’Orangerie). Fénéon was also recognized as a critically important figure at the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, which opened its doors in 2006 to display and celebrate the arts of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania (combining the collections of two previously existing institutions dedicated to this material). Amid the heated debates sparked by the new institution, one of the texts cited most often was a 1920 article edited by Fénéon: “Survey on Arts from Remote Places: Will They Be Admitted to the Louvre?” The two institutions eventually decided to combine their efforts to organize a tribute to him.

At MoMA, the exhibition offers a singular opportunity to look closely at a masterpiece in our collection—Signac’s Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890 (1890)—and explore the extraordinary significance of its subject. An icon of Neo-Impressionism, the painting remained with Fénéon until he died; it was later owned by David and Peggy Rockefeller, among the most generous benefactors in MoMA’s history, who ultimately donated it to the Museum. In the course of organizing this exhibition, we learned that many other works and documents in our collection—including some thirty-eight of the approximately 130 objects in the exhibition—once belonged to Fénéon or have other meaningful connections to his career. More broadly, as this exhibition and catalogue amply demonstrate, the history of modern art—this museum’s raison d’être—is deeply informed by his faithful, prescient actions on behalf of the avant-garde.

The exhibition would not be possible without the major financial support of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, Jack Shear, and Denise Littlefield Sobel. We also appreciate the support of the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities, which has provided a generous indemnity. We extend our profound thanks to the lenders to the exhibition. In generously sharing their treasured works, they have made it possible for a nuanced visual portrait of one of the most fascinating but hidden figures in the history of modernism to finally emerge.

GLENN D. LOWRY
The David Rockefeller Director,
The Museum of Modern Art

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies owe their existence to the talent and dedication of many people within and outside of The Museum of Modern Art. We must first thank our colleagues at the Musées d’Orsay et de l’Orangerie and the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac for initiating the project in Paris and inviting MoMA to join them as a partner institution. We extend our warmest appreciation to Laurence des Cars, President, Musées d’Orsay et de l’Orangerie; Cécile Delbray, Director, Musée de l’Orangerie; Stéphane Martin, former President, and Jérôme Roustanelli, acting President, Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, for their generous collaboration. I am profoundly grateful to Isabelle Cahn, Senior Curator of Paintings at the Musée d’Orsay, and Philippe Péliter, former Head of the Oceania and Insulindia Unit at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, the cocurators of the two complementary Fénéon exhibitions that took place at the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac and the Musée de l’Orangerie in 2019, for warmly welcoming me to the project and working closely with me to realize its final iteration at MoMA. Their curatorial acumen, intellectual acuity, and generous collegiality have made every aspect of the collaboration a pleasure and an inspiration.

We are indebted to the Fénéon teams at the Paris museums for their gracious assistance and advice at every turn. At the Musée d’Orsay, we thank Sylvie Patry, Director of Collections and Curatorial Affairs; Hélène Flat, Director of Exhibitions; Pascale Demarie, Exhibitions Manager; Eloïse Tautbernini, Head of Legal Affairs and Public Contracts; Rachel Servio, Financial and Legal Coordinator for Exhibitions; Eline Dureuil, Curator of Decorative Arts; Stéphane Bayard, Assistant to the Lean Committee; Anne Defour, Director of Publications, Marie Jemirache, Publication Manager, and Nadège Plan; and Scarlett Requin, Head of Courses, Colloquia, and Conferences. At the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, we thank Laurence Deshein, Director of Loans, Deposits, and Acquisitions; Christine Drouin, Director of Cultural Development; Chih-Chia Chung, Assistant to the Director of Cultural Development; Isabelle Laine, Exhibition Manager; Marie Osmella, Assistant to the Head of the Exhibitions Department; Marine Martinsson, Registrar for Exhibitions; Jonathan Astal and Sarah Pace, Registrars for Loans; Valérie Eyone, Administrative Assistant; and the Publishing Department.

At MoMA, I thank Glenn D. Lowry, The David Rockefeller Director, for enthusiastically embracing this project from the very beginning. I am deeply
grateful to Ramona Bannayan, Senior Deputy Director for Exhibitions and Collections, for her always wise and essential guidance, and to Peter Road, Senior Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs, for his thoughtful support. My profound thanks go to Ann Temkin, The MarieJosie and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and Christophe Cherix, The Robert Lehman Foundation Chief Curator of Drawings and Prints, for entrusting me with this project and providing vital support at every stage. Anna Bhruta, Curatorial Assistant, has been my closest curatorial collaborator, and I am extremely grateful to her for the efficiency, diplomacy, intelligence, and good will she has brought to every task. Angelique Rosales Salgado, Joint Fellow at MoMA and the Studio Museum, Harlem, joined the project in the crucial months leading up to the exhibition opening, and she quickly became an esteemed member of the Fénéon team.

The exhibition planning ran smoothly thanks to the superlative efforts of Rachel Kim, Senior Exhibition Manager, who oversaw complex logistical and budgetary details. I also thank Jerk Patton, Director of Exhibition Planning and Administration, and Jennifer Cohen, Associate Director of Exhibition Planning and Administration, for their guidance and oversight. Victoria Manning, Assistant Registrar, masterfully organized international and domestic loans and shipments; I am grateful as well to Sofianni Rita Atkins, Head Registrar, for her support. Numerous internal loans were facilitated by Lilly Goldberg, Collection Specialist in the Department of Paintings and Sculpture; Juliette Kishkin, Curator, and Paul Caffrey, Collection Specialist, in the Department of Architecture and Design; Emily Cushman, Collection Specialist in the Department of Drawings and Prints; and Michelle Elfegott, Chief of Archives, Library, and Research Collections, Jennifer Tobias, Librarian, and Elisabeth Thomas, Assistant Archivist. Lana Hum, Director of Exhibition Design and Production, was an indispensable partner who designed a superb installation with her team, including Michelle Arons, Alexander Diczok, and Benjamin Atkanan. Peter Perez and his colleagues in the Museum's frame shop were responsible for framing many of the works on display, and, as usual, they attended to this task with unparalleled skill and creativity. Aaron Harrow and Aaron Louis deftly oversaw the archival aspects of the exhibition. Rob Jung, Tom Krueger, and Sarah Wood led our team of art handlers to install the artworks with meticulous care.

In the Department of Conservation, led by Kate Lewis, The Agnes Gund Chief Conservator, I extend my sincere appreciation to Michael Duffy, Lynda Zycherman, Laura Neufeld, Annie Willer, and Ana Martinis for their dedicated care and treatment of the works on view. Thanks also go to Ursula Mitra, independent conservator, who treated selected volumes from the Museum’s Library. I am grateful as well to Uniqi Addeny, Chief Facilities and Safety Officer, Daniel Platt, Director of Security, and their staff for ensuring the safety of the Museum and the objects on display. In the Department of Drawings and Prints, I am particularly grateful to my fellow curators Johi Hauptman, Sarah Suzuki, Esther Adler, and Sumanta Frisron, for their invaluable research and organizational assistance at key moments. The administrative team, led by John Prochilo and including Bernardette Fitzgerald and Alicia Russo, helped in countless ways to facilitate the planning of the exhibition. David Moreno and Jeff White helpfully transported works and facilitated viewings.

On the Museum’s Creative team, I thank Leah Dickerman, Director of Editorial and Content Strategy, Rob Baker, Director of Marketing and Creative Strategy, Rob Giampietro, Director of Design, and H.Y. Ingrid Chou, Creative Director, as well as Prudence Peiffer, Natasha Gillibert, Manuel Barnesheim, Rebecca Stokes, Wendy Olson, and Lama Makareen for their innovative contributions to shaping and promoting the exhibition. I am grateful to Claire Corey, Kevin Bullin, and Hartman for their inspired designs and graphic designs; to Jacqueline Cruz for overseeing the production of digital media for the exhibition.

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This catalogue has been prepared by the Museum’s Department of Publications. Christopher Hudson, Publisher, Curtis R. Scott, Associate Publisher, Don McMahon, Editorial Director, and Marc Supir, Production Director, provided essential guidance. In editing the catalog, we were fortunate to have the assistance of the dedicated work of our contributors, who, under extreme time pressure, Rebecca Roberts, Editor, scrupulously clarified and improved the contents of the book; Maria Marchenkova and Jaclyn Niendorf ably assisted her in editing selected texts and Ostana Tong provided crucial research, proofreading, and other support; Matthew Pomn, Production Manager, expertly supervised the production of the book and ensured the quality of printing on every page. Amanda Wisbich, Senior Designer, designed the book with remarkable creativity, sensitivity, and expertise; at her side were Hannah Kim, broth; Sophie Goh, Department Manager, and Naomi Falk, Rights Coordinator,
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Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the loved ones on the home front who supported the members of the Fénon team during the course of this complex project. Among them, I thank my own family, especially Owen, Luther, and Quentin Dugan, for their encouragement and sacrifice. Like everyone listed here, they have, perhaps without even realizing it, paid appropriate homage to an extraordinary and almost forgotten figure who made an art of brilliantly and selflessly making things happen from behind the scenes.

STARR FIGURA
Curator
Department of Drawings and Prints

helped manage many additional details. In the Department of Imaging and Visual Resources, Robert Kastler, Director, Kurt Heumiller, Studio Production Manager, and photographers Jonathan Muskar, Robert Gerhardt, John Wronn, Dennis Doorly, and Clint Caruaghe generated the beautiful images of works in MUMA’s collection that appear in these pages; Roberto Rivera and Jennifer Sellass facilitated our access to these images. Ten of the fifteen essays in this volume were originally commissioned for the French version of the catalogue, published by our partner institutions in Paris. We are grateful to the Publications Department at the Musée d’Orsay for making these texts available to us and for providing the images files for some ninety works illustrated here. We thank Jeanine Herman for her careful translation of the French texts.

Because Fénon’s career was so multifaceted and parts of it have been virtually unknown, it was necessary to enlist a range of scholars to address the various moments in his biography for this catalogue. For their excellent contributions, I am grateful to my co-curator Isabelle Cahn and Philippe Fillieule and to Cécile Bargues, Vaille Blou, Megan Fontanella, Claudine Grammont, Joan U. Halperin, Charlotte Helfman, Briceair Joyeux Franel, Patricia Leighisten, Lia Saint Raymood, Élodie Vaudrey, and Marnin Young. Several of these writers also gave freely of their knowledge and expertise to inform various aspects of the publication and the exhibition, and for that I extend my additional thanks. A debt of gratitude is also due to Joshua I. Cohen and Margaret Worth for their thoughtful queries and suggestions as peer reviewers of this catalogue.

Fénon’s legacy today rests largely on the life’s work of Joan U. Halperin, Fénon’s pioneering biographer, and all of our efforts are fundamentally indebted to her brilliant research. I want to thank her as well for the warmth, generosity, and modesty with which she has embraced this project and made herself available to us. As she would be the first to point out, the Fénon literature is also bolstered by the earlier, groundbreaking work of Jean Paulhan, among everyone listed here, they have, perhaps without even realizing it, paid appropriate homage to an extraordinary and almost forgotten figure who made an art of brilliantly and selflessly making things happen from behind the scenes.
Félix Fénéon famously chose to remain in the shadows, while his art and literary criticism, along with his work as publisher and art dealer, shaped the world of art and letters not only in France but elsewhere in Europe and in the United States. He spoke of himself as a simple "hyphen" between the artist and the public. Yet he did not avoid being portrayed by artists and writers who knew him. He collaborated on some of these portraits, sitting—or standing—for the pose. Photographs of him as a young dandy (fig. 8) or impersonating a Mephistopheles mask after his acquittal in the Trial of the Thirty (plate 1) reveal that in his younger years he enjoyed self-representation. Caricatures by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and fictional renditions of him in romans à clef by fellow writers depict him as striking but strange, elusive but strongly present. In contrast, power and clarity may retreat in a frontal portrait, giving way to a different relationship—slippery, uncertain, possibly penetrating—engaging simultaneously the viewer and the person represented. In a self-portrait Fénéon sketched in spring or summer 1894 while in prison awaiting trial for anarchist activity, his head, equipped with a hook, hangs from a nail (fig. 1), his gaze intense as he faces the viewer—or his interrogator. Indiscernible words appear on the nail; on the hook one can make out "Innocentii." A flower, a native to Brazil, one of whose subspecies is called innocenti, perhaps in homage. Although Fénéon stands alone, the portrait places him in a specific social and aesthetic milieu. It also conveys a certain amount of influence and power. It is what I would call an emblem portrait, reminiscent of the effigies of kings and queens—often in profile—that appear on coins and stamps.

A portrait image is a construct that can take many forms. It can picture its subject in profile, in three-quarter view, in full face or head only, or as a whole body. It can be formulaic, realistic, symbolic, or abstract. It can be sketched, drawn, painted, collaged, carved in stone or wood or bone, photographed, or filmed. And it can be written. My 1988 biography of Fénéon is a portrait. To encompass his multiple activities, I broke his life, artificially, into segments. Indeed, all portraits are prismatic, falsifying in order to clarify, focusing the lens from one angle or another, never taking in the whole.

The portraits in the exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, along with others in this volume, allow viewers to see Fénéon in various contexts. Presented in profile, for example, he appears in his professional milieu, as editor or critic. In portraits by Félix Vallotton (plate 53) and Édouard Vuillard (plate 54) and in sketches by Pierre Bonnard (fig. 55) and Kees van Dongen, he is pictured leaning over his desk at a thirty-degree angle, immersed in his work. The viewer of these portraits is solely an observer; there is no sensation of a mutual gaze. The profile Paul Signac presents in his quintessential Neo-Impressionist portrait of Fénéon (plate 4) emphasizes Fénéon’s role in validating the science and symbolism of color prized by the “new” Impressionists. His verticality contrasts with the giant pinwheel of color in the background, and, clad in yellow, he glows like a Byzantine icon. He holds a flower in his extended hand, recalling portraits of the Maghal rulers of India, who carry a blossom for their own contemplation. Here, however, the flower is proffered to someone beyond the frame, perhaps in homage. Although Fénéon stands alone, the portrait places him in a specific social and aesthetic milieu. It also conveys a certain amount of influence and power. It is what I would call an emblem portrait, reminiscent of the effigies of kings and queens—often in profile—that appear on coins and stamps.

In contrast, power and clarity may retreat in a frontal portrait, giving way to a different relationship—slippery, uncertain, possibly penetrating—engaging simultaneously the viewer and the person represented. In a self-portrait Fénéon sketched in spring or summer 1894 while in prison awaiting trial for anarchist activity, his head, equipped with a hook, hangs from a nail (fig. 1), his gaze intense as he faces the viewer—or his interrogator. Indiscernible words appear on the nail; on the hook one can make out "Innocentii." A flower, a native to Brazil, one of whose subspecies is called innocenti. One could plausibly remark that Fénéon depicted his head as a hanging plant; this becomes piquant when one recalls that he was likely the perpetrator of an anarchist bombing, for which the explosive had been placed in a flowerpot. It was a serious matter to be accused of anarchism in the 1890s. Heads of the guillotined were no longer displayed in public, but the hook and nail in Fénéon’s drawing evoke that practice. The gaze, on the other hand, opens to human terror, rage, and inquiry in a way that creates both anxiety and a sense of intense connection for the viewer. Though focused outward, it also has a strong internal power, as if Fénéon were fearlessly, powerfully reaching into segments.

Indeed, all portraits are prismatic, falsifying in order to clarify, focusing the lens from one angle or another, never taking in the whole.
a special kind of communion between sitter and viewer: “The person portrayed in the work of art withdraws and disappears in its depths, and the echo of that absence resounds in me.” Communion between human beings through art was a guiding motif of Fénéon’s life. While he would never deny human difference, the idea of connection was even more powerful to him: he was guided by a strong belief in human communality and community. His conception of community, however, was not one in which the individual is bound to others by convention, territory, or ideology. It was, rather, an openness, embracing the possibility of an unregulated society based on trust in the worth and the “belongingness” of all. In the exhibition, the same notion is stated visually in Signac’s painting _Au temps d’harmonie: L’Âge d’or n’est pas dans le passé; il est dans l’avenir_ (In the Time of Harmony). The Golden Age Has Not Passed; It Is Still to Come, 1891–95; fig. 44 and plate 37), which was created at the height of the anarchist movement in France. The egalitarian society envisaged by the anarchists and depicted by Signac embodies the principles Fénéon lived by: respect for oneself and for others, enjoyment of beauty and pleasure, support of those in need, and solidarity among all. Through contemplation of Fénéon’s portraits, viewers can enter into this concept of community, where being together is the foundation of the individual.

and fellow anarchist, is a full-face portrait (fig. 2): wide-eyed, Fénéon is there en soi. Shed of his mask, has chosen mutual trust. A similar trust can be sensed in a portrait of an older Fénéon by Émile Compard (fig. 3), a delicate ink-wash sketch in which the direct gaze of the older man conveys a homey sort of rapport with the young artist.

On the other hand, a definite lack of trust between photographer and subject is in evidence in the two-part mug shot made of Fénéon by the Paris police anthropometry bureau, run by Alphonse Bertillon himself, when Fénéon was arrested in April 1894 (plate 30). The profile presents the subject’s strong, distinct traits, which could signal, according to the new anthropometric “science,” that he was a dangerous subject. The full-face view is impassive, express- ing integrity albeit with a hint of fear. In the hostile environment of the police station, Fénéon was vulnerable in a new way. He was at that point only a suspect, but the photographs cast him as a criminal.

Yet another portrait of Fénéon, a face-stretching sketch (plate 52) and depiction of a sulfurous-yellow Fénéon in a woodcut portrait of a truculent Fénéon (page 6) and Toulouse-Lautrec’s thirty, Fénéon was acquitted that summer along with nearly all of his codefendants. The power of a portrait resides in its ability to re-present the existence of a person. Yet despite the portrait’s existence, it implies absence. As Joan Halperin has written, this loss contains a mystery, for the “disappearance” of the model creates a special kind of communion between sitter and viewer: “The person portrayed in the work of art withdraws and disappears in its depths, and the echo of that absence resounds in me.” Communion between human beings through art was a guiding motif of Fénéon’s life. While he would never deny human difference, the idea of connection was even more powerful to him: he was guided by a strong belief in human communality and community. His conception of community, however, was not one in which the individual is bound to others by convention, territory, or ideology. It was, rather, an openness, embracing the possibility of an unregulated society based on trust in the worth and the “belongingness” of all. In the exhibition, the same notion is stated visually in Signac’s painting _Au temps d’harmonie: L’Âge d’or n’est pas dans le passé; il est dans l’avenir_ (In the Time of Harmony). The Golden Age Has Not Passed; It Is Still to Come, 1891–95; fig. 44 and plate 37), which was created at the height of the anarchist movement in France. The egalitarian society envisaged by the anarchists and depicted by Signac embodies the principles Fénéon lived by: respect for oneself and for others, enjoyment of beauty and pleasure, support of those in need, and solidarity among all. Through contemplation of Fénéon’s portraits, viewers can enter into this concept of community, where being together is the foundation of the individual.

and fellow anarchist, is a full-face portrait (fig. 2): wide-eyed, Fénéon is there en soi. Shed of his mask, has chosen mutual trust. A similar trust can be sensed in a portrait of an older Fénéon by Émile Compard (fig. 3), a delicate ink-wash sketch in which the direct gaze of the older man conveys a homey sort of rapport with the young artist.

On the other hand, a definite lack of trust between photographer and subject is in evidence in the two-part mug shot made of Fénéon by the Paris police anthropometry bureau, run by Alphonse Bertillon himself, when Fénéon was arrested in April 1894 (plate 30). The profile presents the subject’s strong, distinct traits, which could signal, according to the new anthropometric “science,” that he was a dangerous subject. The full-face view is impassive, express- ing integrity albeit with a hint of fear. In the hostile environment of the police station, Fénéon was vulnerable in a new way. He was at that point only a suspect, but the photographs cast him as a criminal.

Yet another portrait of Fénéon, a face-stretching sketch (plate 52) and depiction of a sulfurous-yellow Fénéon in a woodcut portrait of a truculent Fénéon (page 6) and Toulouse-Lautrec’s thirty, Fénéon was acquitted that summer along with nearly all of his codefendants. The power of a portrait resides in its ability to re-present the existence of a person. Yet despite the portrait’s existence, it implies absence. As Joan Halperin has written, this loss contains a mystery, for the “disappearance” of the model creates a special kind of communion between sitter and viewer: “The person portrayed in the work of art withdraws and disappears in its depths, and the echo of that absence resounds in me.” Communion between human beings through art was a guiding motif of Fénéon’s life. While he would never deny human difference, the idea of connection was even more powerful to him: he was guided by a strong belief in human communality and community. His conception of community, however, was not one in which the individual is bound to others by convention, territory, or ideology. It was, rather, an openness, embracing the possibility of an unregulated society based on trust in the worth and the “belongingness” of all. In the exhibition, the same notion is stated visually in Signac’s painting _Au temps d’harmonie: L’Âge d’or n’est pas dans le passé; il est dans l’avenir_ (In the Time of Harmony). The Golden Age Has Not Passed; It Is Still to Come, 1891–95; fig. 44 and plate 37), which was created at the height of the anarchist movement in France. The egalitarian society envisaged by the anarchists and depicted by Signac embodies the principles Fénéon lived by: respect for oneself and for others, enjoyment of beauty and pleasure, support of those in need, and solidarity among all. Through contemplation of Fénéon’s portraits, viewers can enter into this concept of community, where being together is the foundation of the individual. 
“It would not be a commonplace portrait at all, but a carefully composed picture, with very carefully arranged colors and lines. A rhythmic and angular pose. A decorative Félix, entering with his hat or a flower in his hand.”

PAUL SIGNAC TO FÉLIX FÉNÉON, JULY 23, 1890

Signac’s portrait, Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890; plate 4), is indeed far from commonplace. It is one of the most extraordinary portraits ever painted, an icon of Neo-Impressionism that seduces us by virtue of both its swirling patterns of rainbow-colored dots in the background and the enigmatic, magician-like presence of the dandy who strides across the foreground. The painting’s vibrant pinwheel sets into motion the nineteenth century color theories that Signac and his fellow Neo-Impressionists admired—and the excessively long title is their inside-joking nod to the pedantic titles given to those scientific studies (see figs. 32 and 90 and the essay by Starr Figura on pages 59–65 of this volume). We might also see it as a symbol of the hypnotic, splendidly atmospheric of Paris in the 1890s, through which Fénéon’s sharp and placid figure was ever calmly advancing. Proffering a flower with his right hand and holding his top hat, gloves, and cane in the left, he strides through the transformational currents of that era and greets the unknown with an unflappable grace.
Félix Fénéon—this implacable, inscrutable, meticulous, and mysterious man—is the subject of the present exhibition and catalogue. Though little known today and always discreetly behind the scenes during his own era, Fénéon had a decisive and wide-ranging impact on the development of modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By turns an art critic, editor, publisher, curator, journalist, dealer, and gallerist, he played a key role in the careers of leading artists from Signac and Georges-Pierre Seurat to Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse, among many others. In tandem with his various professional involvements, he was also a collector of both contemporary European art and art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. And he was an anarchist. All of these engagements were informed by an extraordinarily radical, forward-looking worldview in which avant-garde art and radical politics were two sides of the same coin, both having the potential to transform the world for the better. As his biographer Joan U. Halperin has written, “His influence in these areas helped to shape the modern age.”

Fénéon was born in Turin, Italy, in 1864, and he grew up in Burgundy. His father was a traveling salesman. At the age of twenty he moved to Paris after placing first on the competitive exam for jobs at the French Ministry of War. He worked there for thirteen years, from 1881 to 1894, rising quickly to the position of chief clerk. He also plunged himself into Paris’s avant-garde artistic and literary circles. He was a regular at Stéphane Mallarmé’s Tuesday-evening salons. He rescued Arthur Rimbaud’s manuscript for Les Illuminations from obscurity, editing and publishing it in 1886 through Éditions de La Vogue, an imprint he collaborated on with the poet Gustave Kahn, founder of the journal La Libre Revue (fig. 4). In the 1880s he also cofounded three short-lived journals—La Libre Revue, 1883–84 (fig. 5), La Revue indépendante, 1884–85 (fig. 6), and La Cravache, 1888–89—and he contributed essays and criticism on art, literature, and politics to a dozen other periodicals. His art criticism is particularly distinctive (though difficult to translate) for its unique combination of rigor and allusiveness, as Marnin Young relates on pages 33–45.

In 1886 Fénéon coined the term Neo-Impressionism in a review of the eighth and final exhibition of the Impressionists. He was the first to understand and articulate the significance of the Pointillist technique, developed by Seurat and adopted by Signac, Camille Pissarro, Henri Edmond Cross, Albert Dubois-Pillet, and others, which involved the use of tiny dabs of color that mixed in the eye of the viewer to create a harmonious whole. After Seurat died prematurely in 1891, he spent decades working to establish the painter’s legacy, as Isabelle Cahn explains on pages 47–57, by inventorying his estate, organizing exhibitions of his work, providing (anonymously) the meticulous documentation for the first catalogues raisonnés, and strategically helping to place many of the artist’s paintings and drawings in major museums and important private collections. He remained an ardent champion of the Neo-Impressionist artists for the rest of his career and shared an especially close, lifelong friendship with Signac, as Charlotte Himmel recounts on pages 66–69.

During the early years of his career, however, Fénéon led a double life, working industriously to undermine the government’s authority and contributing anonymous articles to a number of anarchist journals in the 1890s. The shocking irony that Fénéon—apparently a model employee at that most nationalistic and authoritarian of government institutions, the Ministry of War—would be arrested on April 25, 1894, in connection with a slew of anarchist bombings, was not lost on the French press. The sensational story was the subject of massive journalistic attention (fig. 7). Fénéon, whose name was on a list of suspected anarchists maintained by the police, was picked up in a sweep following the bombing of Restaurant Foyot on April 4. He was imprisoned for more than three months, at which time the government mounted a case against him and twenty-nine others. Fénéon’s wit and nerve served him well at the so-called Trial of the Thirty that August. In one exchange with the judge he exhibited a characteristically ruthless logic that was surreal before its time:

The judge: You were seen talking to anarchists behind a lamppost.
Fénéon: Can you tell me, Your Honor, where behind a lamppost?
The reporter could not help but note: “Loud, prolonged laughter. The judge calls for order.”

Anarchism was a political ideology that flourished throughout Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anti-
government, antifrederic, anticapitalist, and anticolonial, it was a reaction to the economic and political injustices wrought by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of nation states. In Paris, in particular, anarchism developed in the wake of the Paris Commune of 1871, marred by the unspeakable bitterness caused by its bloody suppression. “The common point is the negation of the principle of Authority in social organization,” wrote the anarchist Sébastien Faure, “and a hatred of all the constraints imposed by the institutions that are based upon that principle.”

Féron rejected government authority and institutions and believed that without them the extreme economic inequalities of the era would be ameliorated; artistic freedom and creativity would flourish, and, as a result, social harmony and justice would reign—a utopian attitude he shared with many late-nineteenth-century idealists including the Neo-Impressionist and Symbolist painters and writers that he counted among his closest friends. Signac, Pissarro, and Maximilien Luce were all committed anarchists, as were Bonnard, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Félix Vallotton. Many of Féron’s fellow writers and journalists, including Kahn, Alfred Jarry, and Octave Mirbeau, were similarly radicalized.

The battle of Montmartre, whose bohemian cafes, theaters, and cabarets were the primary stomping grounds for Féron and his creative friends (plates 43, 44, and 46), was located at the north end of Paris, adjacent to the industrialized suburbs where the working-class poor lived in the shadows of smokestacks belching toxic waste from the production of rubber, chemicals, and steel (see plates 25 and 26). As John Merriman has vividly described, the period known as the Belle Époque—though celebrated for its extraordinary cultural achievements and rapid modernization—was an era of horrendous economic devastation for a large swath of the population. The Paris Commune, a series of editorials challenging the principles of colonialism, and, during the Dreyfus affair, a number of pro-Dreyfusard essays.

Féron and most of his codefendants at the Trial of the Thirty were united. But before we get to that point, the old Union will have to get up some steam and we gotta be slap-dab in the middle of anarcho civilization.”

Everything, great guns, will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fabulous colors. When that happens, the artisse [sic] will have nifty shapes and fab
painter and collector. Signac signaled his initial skepticism in a letter to fellow Neo-Impressionist Charles Angrand: “Félon has joined Monkey nut Bernheim. . . . I don’t see our friend winning out over the boorishness of those industrialists. But the struggle will be interesting.”

In two months Signac’s paintings were selling “beyond our expectations,” and the artist was delighted. Fénion quickly signed Signac, Cross, and Luce to contracts, giving them enhanced public visibility and a hitherto unknown financial security. In the ensuing years he would sign contracts with other artists, including Kees van Dongen and Matisse, whose crucial relationship with Fénion is described by Claudine Grammont on pages 148–53. He was equally faithful to Bonnard and Vuillard. Although they had already been showing at Bernheim Jeune, Fénion strengthened their ties to the gallery, mounting solo exhibitions for Bonnard, in particular, nearly every year for the next two decades. The most sensational of the shows Fénion staged at Bernheim Jeune was the first exhibition of the Italian Futurists in Paris in 1912. It marked a milestone in the history of modernism, as Figura relates on pages 154–57.

THE ELUSIVE F. F.

Implicit in Signac’s fantastical portrait is not only the respect and admiration the artist felt for the critic who had helped to launch his career, but also the aura of mystery and fascination that enveloped him. Fénion deliberately fashioned an unusual look. Tall, slender, and elegant to the point of dandyism, he played on his physical traits in order to distinguish himself (fig. 8).

Many of Fénion’s friends and acquaintances remarked on his enigmatic personality and the surprising contradictions he embodied. His wispy goatee (not uncommonplace style at the time) reminded them of Uncle Sam, and the devilish air that he actively cultivated was unmistakable (plate 1). The Symbolist writer René de Gourmont described him as “a Yankee Mephistopheles,” and a generation later Guillaume Apollinaire nicknamed him “the fake Yankee of rue Richepanse” (the street where Bernheim Jeune was located). For Jarry he was “a satyr born in Brooklyn (U.S.A.).” Another writer, Annette Vaillant, noticed in him an amusing conflation of angel and animal. “Félon, an enigmatic personage, with the look of an angelic goat with his light eyes and his threadbare Mandarin’s beard, did everything exactly, scrutinized everything with the thoroughness of a certified public accountant. The painters came [to Galerie Bernheim Jeune] to see the aesthete, their friend, the discerning art critic, now a clever dealer, mischievous as well as cultivated, who had lost none of his whimsy.”

His discretion led him to publish a number of texts anonymously, especially the reviews he wrote in the anarchist press in the early 1890s. Sometimes he used the byline “F. F.” which would have been recognizable to insiders, and sometimes his chum-sклон side led him to use a variety of whimsical pseudonyms, including feminine names like Félicie, Thérèse, or Denise. Such noms de plume were not simply fanciful: Mallarmé and Apollinaire used them as well, to express a more secret, subversively feminine aspect of their sensibilities.

Many artists in addition to Signac could not resist the chance to capture something of the elusive Fénion in a portrait. Toulouse Lautrec exaggerated his eccentric appearance when he painted Fénion together with Oscar Wilde in a massive canvas that decorated the outside of the fairgrounds booth for the cancan dancer La Goulue’s traveling show (fig. 9). La Goulue, or “the gut,” was Louise Weber, a famously outrageous cancan dancer whose stage name referred to her habit of drinking from her customers’ glasses while she performed. The association of these three personalities, who at the time were far from any form of social respectability—a cancan dancer, a homosexual writer, and an anarchist critic—could be interpreted as the manifesto of an assumed nonconformity.

In La Lecture par Émile Verhaeren (The Lecture by Émile Verhaeren, 1903; fig. 10), the Belgian Neo-Impressionist Théo van Rysselberghe paid homage to the detached yet dominant force of Fénion’s personality. Among a cohort of eight French and Belgian writers, Fénion is shown leaning against a mantelpiece with an air of wry nonchalance, a cigarette dangling carelessly between his fingers. He stands slightly behind and apart from the others, who lean in at the table, yet his position within the composition’s loose pyramid is clearly superior. Vallotton (plate 51) and Vuillard (plate 54) also created reverential portraits, in both cases depicting Fénion hunched over his desk at La Revue blanche.
thoroughly absorbed in the work of readying manuscripts for publication. Luce was, as one admirer put it, a "secret animator." He worked assiduously to promote others, pulling strings behind the scenes, encouraging writers to publish, providing opportunities for painters to exhibit, and pushing them all into the spotlight, whereas for himself he had only contempt for recognition and glory. Toward the end of his life, when he was asked to publish an anthology of his writing, Fénéon replied, characteristically, "I aspire only to silence." As Luc Sante has astutely put it, "They demonstrate in miniature his epigrammatic flair, his exquisite timing, his pinpoint precision of language, his exceedingly dry humor, his calculated effrontery, his tenderness and cruelty, his contained outrage."

COLLECTION FÉLIX FÉNÉON

For some fifty years, from the beginning of his career in the 1880s until at least the early 1930s, Fénéon collected paintings, drawings, and posters by the artists he admired. Stuffed into a succession of modest Paris apartments were scores of works by the Neo-Impressionists, including Seurat, Signac, Pissarro, Luys, Cross, Angrand, van Rysselberghe, and Ker-Xavier Roussel; by Nabis such as Bonnard, Vuillard, and Vallotton; and by twentieth-century Fauves including Matisse, van Dongen, André Derain, and Raoul Dufy. Mixed in with these famous names were less familiar artists whose work and friendship he also valued: Lucie Constaert, Émile Cézard, Marcel Gromaire, and Severino Rappu, among many others. Toward the end of his career, in the 1920s, he became enchanted by Amedeo Modigliani, acquiring at least eight major paintings. He also came to own a few works by the Surrealists André Masson and Max Ernst, whom he probably met through his work as editor at yet another progressive publishing venture, Éditions de La Sirène, between 1920 and 1924 (where, among other things, he published the first French translation of James Joyce). If there is one quality that unites most of these works, it is a bold, modernist approach to color. Shunning the Fénéons’ crowded homes was an equally astonishing assortment of objects from Africa, Oceania and the Americas (fig. 12). As Philippe Peltier explains on pages 181–93, it is unclear exactly when Fénéon began acquiring these works, but it may have been as early as 1904 (two years earlier than Matisse, Derain, and Pablo Picasso first began to pay serious attention to them). Fénéon was part of the ever-widening circle of artists, dealers, and collectors who were passionately engaged with these objects in the early twentieth century. Most approached them with a romanticizing view that reduced them to the embodiment of an idealized, precivilized state. Fénéon’s interest also stemmed from his anarchist anticolonialism. He was one of the first Europeans to launch an inquiry into the issue of the proper status and disposition of the artworks that had been brought into Europe through colonial channels and were, at that time, exhibited primarily in ethnographic museums, according to the hierarchies of European civilization. In 1920, he published an article in La Revue de la vie artistique—yet another journal he founded—entitled “Enquête sur des arts lointains: Seront-ils admis au Louvre?” (Survey on arts from remote places: Will they be admitted to the Louvre?). In it, as Cécile Bargeton explains on pages 196–99, he asked a number of artists, collectors, dealers, and intellectuals to respond to his prescient question. He also sought to advance the understanding of these works by lending them generously to exhibitions, including MoMA’s “African Negro Art” in 1935, as Vivien老百姓, Luï Saint-Raymond, and Élodie Vaudry recount on pages 200–203.
The breadth and quality of Fénéon’s collection is only partially suggested by the total number of works put up for sale in the five auctions dedicated to them in 1941 and 1947. The first was a means of raising funds to pay his cancer-related hospital bills. The other four took place after he and his wife, Fanny, had both died (he in 1944 and she in 1946). Together these auctions comprised some 475 drawings and paintings by more than fifty European artists as well as at least four hundred non-Western works. The number of items that passed through Fénéon’s hands was much greater than this, however, as he regularly sold or gave away paintings, drawings, and other objects. In the case of Seurat, for example, some twenty paintings and fifty four drawings were sold at the auctions, yet the provenance information published in the 1964 catalogue (which was based, crucially, on Fénéon’s detailed notes) reveals that there were some fifty three paintings and 180 drawings by Seurat in Fénéon’s collection at one point or another. In most cases, we do not know what prompted him to part with certain works at certain moments, but we do know that he made colossal efforts to place specific works in important collections, such as that of Solomon R. Guggenheim in the 1930s, as Mogen Fontanella relates on pages 158–63. Fénéon was known for his generosity, and he sometimes gave smaller works away. He gave a small study for Signac’s Opus 27 (fig. 35) to the art historian John Rewold in the 1930s; Rewold, in turn, gave it to The Museum of Modern Art.

Fénéon did not come from wealth. He was able to amass such a collection in part because he appreciated the artworks before others did and because he had such close relationships with the artists. Some works he bought as a way of helping less fortunate artists. Others, it is safe to assume, he felt he could not live without. Modern art was a priority in his life, both for the great visual pleasure it gave him and for the ideals of freedom, revolution, and a more liberated future that he felt it represented. And so, as his assistant at Bernheim-Jeune, Francis de Mionmande, explained, “piece by piece and depriving himself of everything, like a Balzacian hero, he put together the most beautiful collection of modern paintings in Paris” as well as a major collection “of objects of African art (statuettes, masks, weapons, etc.), because he was the first to discover their classic beauty beneath their appearance of foreignness and exoticism.”

A Communist in the later decades of his life, Fénéon thought of bequeathing his collection to the Russian people, partly to support their struggle and partly because he was wary of the reactionary tastes of French museums, especially the Musée du Luxembourg, which presented the work of living artists. This idea arose in a political context that was particularly troubled by the rise of fascism in Europe and against a backdrop of violent manifestations by the far right Crîus de Féé league in Paris. André Gide’s Return from the U.S.S.R. (1936) and the signing of the German Soviet pact in 1939 probably signaled the end of his illness.

By refusing to give the collection to an institution, Fénéon asserted his desire not to leave his name to posterity, in conformance with his anarchist convictions. He even went to the point of destroying his private documents. “It was pathetic,” wrote Rewold, “and yet admirable to see his efforts to leave nothing behind him but admiration in the hearts of those who had known and loved him. Perhaps he would have wanted to destroy that admiration too if he knew how.”

The 1941 sale brought in six million francs, providing financially for the Fénéons until their deaths. The final sale, in 1947, brought in twenty million francs (fig. 13). Per Fénéon’s instructions, the money was used to create a literary and artistic prize at the Université de Paris known as the Prix Fénéon. The auctions, lauded for their record-setting sales by the French press, may at any attempt to reconstruct Fénéon’s collection a daunting prospect today, as the works were dispersed in many different and unknown directions. The auction catalogues, moreover, include only a cursory listing of the objects, accompanied by very few illustrations. Still, these works—a selection of which forms the spine of this exhibition—totally compose a portrait of their former owner. In a short unpublished introduction for the 1941 sale catalogue, Fénéon wrote a biographical note in the third person that points to his deep identification with his collection: “We will not insist on either his incursions into the literary field or his taste for the sculpture of the Tropics, or on other forms of his activity, for it is expressly in the collection promised to the hammer of M. Alphonse Bellier that one finds the image of his personality, faithful, complete, and singular.”

References

2. Halperin, Félix Fénéon, 64.
3. Alphonse Bellier that one finds the image of his personality, faithful, complete, and singular.

Fig. 12. Félix and Fanny Fénéon in their apartment, c. 1928-29. Photograph. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York.
“Anyone can err, especially a critic. But to express without frivolity or insincerity what one feels—I admire that.”
It was Félix Fénéon who inspired Paul Signac to create what is arguably his greatest painting: Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890 (Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890, 1890; plate 4). Apotheosizing his brilliant friend and most fervent champion, Signac placed Fénéon’s hieratic figure against a swirling, kaleidoscopic background. The sheer boldness of the painting—the unprecedented way that it marshals color, pattern, and brushstroke to bridge representation and abstraction—marks a crescendo in the history of Neo-Impressionism, born in part from the symbiotic friendship between the painter and the critic. It stands not only as the quintessential portrait of Fénéon but also as a visual manifesto for Neo-Impressionism and its basis in nineteenth century color theory, and, ultimately, as a radiant signal of the advent of modernism.

FÉNÉON AND SIGNAC

Fénéon and Signac first met around 1884, when they were both in their early twenties and gaining entrée to the heady world of avant-garde culture by frequenting the same Symbolist literary salons. By 1886, Signac had begun applying paint to his canvases in tiny dots—an approach deeply influenced by his good friend Georges Pierre Seurat. That same year, Fénéon christened Signac’s and Seurat’s work “néo-impressionniste” in his review of the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition. Fénéon quickly became the Neo-Impressionists’ most ardent and perceptive advocate in the press, and Signac, who was naturally sociable and outspoken (in contrast to the quiet, austere Seurat), became the chief spokesperson...
for the artist in their circle, which soon included Camille Pissarro, Albert Dubois-Pillet, Maximilien Luce, and others.

Among the articles Pénéon wrote as the Neo-Impressionists’ foremost apostle was the first biog-raphy of Signac, published as a four-page issue of the journal *Les Hommes d’hier et d’aujourd’hui* in the spring of 1890. Seurat’s charcoal portrait of Signac graced the cover (fig. 40). Pénéon opened the text by calling Signac “the young glory of Neo-Impressionism,” then went on to explain the premises that underlay the artist’s approach to color: “Two colors situate an effect or mutual influence, each imposing its own complementary on the other; for green a purple, for red a blue green, for yellow an ultramarine, for violet a greenish yellow, for orange a cyan blue, contrast of hues. The lightest one becomes lighter; the darkest one darker: contrast of values.”

Pénéon’s writing was informed by his enthusi-asm for contemporary color theories, which he shared with Signac and Seurat. Of particular interest to all three was the work of their friend Charles Henry, a mathematician, poet, librarian, and amateur scientist. Henry’s *Introduction à une esthétique scientifique* (Introduction to a scientific aesthetics, 1885) strongly influenced the Neo-Impressionists, who sought to apply his principles of the emotive potential of specific colors, lines, and directions and their combinations. Signac collaborated closely with Henry on his later publications, providing charts and diagrams to illustrate his aesthetic theories. As Joan U. Halperin has noted, Henry’s ideas about the physiology of sensations appealed to Fénéon because their basis in science offered ways not only “to counteract superstitions and prejudices embedded in religious and moral codes, but also to understand and explore new literary and art forms.” But Pénéon also playfully mocked his efforts to quantify art and poetry, describ-ing Henry thus in his entry in the satirical *Petit Bottin des lettres et des arts* (Little dictionary of literature and arts, 1886): “Measures the power of a meta-phor of Mallarmé on the dynamograph, analyzes the verses of Jules Laforgue (Little directory of literature and arts, 1886): “Measures the power of a meta-phor of Mallarmé on the dynamograph, analyzes the verses of Jules Laforgue on a very high, very narrow canvas. A well-defined background and shades gradually through orange, red, purple, blue, and green, prefiguring the chromatic arrangement of the painting to come (fig. 33).

Henry’s theories built upon the work of other scientists; Fénéon and the Neo-Impressionists studied them as well. The French chemist Ogien Nicholas Reyl’s *Modern Chromatics, with Applications to Art and Industry* (1877; fig. 32) advised painters to create an optical mixture of colors by “placing the chromatic arrangement of the painting to come (fig. 33).

Signac was true to his word about requiring little of Fénéon’s time for sitting. He made known drawings to consult while painting: an oil sketch of the full composition on wood (fig. 34), a small sketch of the head in profile (fig. 35), and a gouache study for the background (fig. 36). The last reveals that Signac made extensive revisions to the sequence of patterns in the composition’s backdrop; several layers of corrections were pasted over different segments. The plan for a vertical canvas changed, apparently when Signac decided to base the portrait’s pinwheel background on a horizontally oriented illustration in a book with Japanese kimono patterns (fig. 37).
Signac’s depiction of Félix Fénéon emphasizes the critic’s reputation as a dandy. Dandies, as Charles Baudelaire famously wrote, “have no other calling but to cultivate the idea of beauty in their persons, to satisfy their passions, to feel and to think.” Dandyism does not even consist . . . in an immoderate taste for the toilet and material elegance. For the perfect dandy, these things are no more than symbols of his aristocratic superiority of mind. . . . At certain points, dandyism borders upon the spiritual and the stoical.15

Fénéon’s dandyism expressed itself in the aestheticism of his writing, his love of art, his stocic reserve, his disdain for the bourgeoisie, and the refined and slightly eccentric way in which he dressed and groomed himself. The yellow jacket that Signac specifically asked him to wear is one of a number of details that speak to the critic’s dandyism in the portrait. Signac accentuated Fénéon’s tall, trim figure, elegant in the overcoat that he wears with a black vest, red tie, and starched white shirt. In the lapel pocket is a perfectly folded handkerchief. In his left hand, he carries the walking stick, gloves, and top hat that he was known to take with him whenever he went out. With a gesture of formality, generosity, and grace, he extends his right hand to offer a flower—a cyclamen—to someone outside the picture. Against Fénéon’s stated wishes, Signac depicted his friend in profile, highlighting his distinctive nose and goatee—the strangely provocative, almost devilishly nonconformist wisp of facial hair that was a personal trademark.

While Fénéon’s figure is remarkable by itself, it is the unusual abstract background and the way it merges with the figure in the foreground that give the painting its mysterious power. Radiating out from a point just slightly above and to the left of the center of the canvas are eight curved segments. Each features a different pattern made up of complementary hues: purple is inflected with yellow arabesques, orange stripes alternate with blue, planetary disks in shades of yellow are surrounded by violet, deep blue is peppered with yellow-orange stars, orange is patterned with pale blue petals, strips of red abut strips of green. One of the segments gradually shifts from almost white at the center to dark blue at the outer edge, creating a sense of visual flow. The entire painting is composed of tiny Pointillist patches of color—many of them not dots but small rectangular brushstrokes—variously oriented to follow the shape or thrust of the pattern they are being used to describe (fig. 38). Upon close inspection, we can see that each passage is composed not just from a mass of brushstrokes in the main color but also from a smaller number of strokes in a complementary color. As Rood and Henry prescribed, these colors blend in the eye to a certain degree when viewed from a distance and, in the process of doing so, generate a shimmering luminosity. The subtle charges given off by the complementary colors and the directional brushstrokes enhance the sense of swirling motion generated by the pinwheel pattern, which also suggests infinite expansion.

The painting pays homage to Henry’s idea of “continual auto-genesis,” the self-perpetuating energy of the arabesque.16 Whether in musical or visual form, the arabesque is, as José Argüelles has characterized it, “often intricate, repetitive, self-reproductive, and, ideally, self-mutative.”17 This ornamental motif and its variants, including the meander, the spiral, and the zigzag, can be found
across cultures and in most tribal and decorative arts. In Opus 207, the lines of Fénéon's nose, elbow, and cane descend in a zigzag pattern. His bent arms, the upturned curl of his goatee, the arrangement of the fingers of his right hand, and the cyclamen he holds (its very name signaling the circular or cyclical) all echo the clockwise spin of the background. This visual rhyme brings the contradiction between foreground and background—Signac's vertical, static figure (a representation) and the pinwheel's decorative and optical patterning (an abstract pattern)—into harmony. Although the slabs of color used for Fénéon's face and his arm are a bit smaller and more closely compacted than those used in other areas, the general uniformity of Signac's Pointillism across the canvas reinforces the synthesis.

As Fénéon had written in his biography of Signac, "The flight of each color is free, and the solidarity of all is strict: the canvas is unified; and the canvas reinforces the synthesis. As Fénéon had written in his biography of Signac, "The flight of each color is free, and the solidarity of all is strict: the canvas is unified; and the canvas reinforces the synthesis."

The uncomprehending reviews indicate how radical the painting was. While a number of Signac's avant-garde peers, including Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh (fig. 39), had begun to set their portrait subjects against decorative backgrounds that emphasize the flat surface of the picture plane, Signac's stylized portrait is in some respects even more radically abstract and forward-looking. Its argument for the primacy of color and color relationships— as theorized by Henry and proselytized by Fénéon—would come to be one of the cornerstones of modernism in the twentieth century, as exemplified by a number of artists that Fénéon himself would later promote, from Henri Matisse and Kees van Dongen to the Futurists, as well as other key modernists, from Vasily Kandinsky and Sonia Delaunay-Terk to Josef Albers and Ellsworth Kelly. In this sense, perhaps the painting offers a precocious vision of the modern encap-sulated in the magician-like figure of Fénéon, who did have and would continue to do as much as anyone to coax it into existence.

RECEPTION

Opus 207 was first exhibited at the Salon des indépendants in the spring of 1891. Visitors, even those close to Signac and Fénéon, were surprised and troubled by the painting. The art critic Gustave Geffroy wrote, "My taste for explication stops short in front of [this] painting." 18 And the Belgian poet Émile Verhaeren declared, "This cold and dry portrait can hardly please us as much as the landscapes by the same painter." 19 Another critic, Jules Antoine, called the portrait "cruel" and lamented that Fénéon's figure was sacrificed to the background. 20 Possarro expressed his disappointment in this "bizarre portrait of Fénéon, standing, holding a bly, against a background of interlacing ribbons of color which are with no decorative nor comprehensible in terms of feeling, and do not even give the work decorative beauty." 21 Arène Alexandre was the only critic who seemed to understand the painting, though his words suggest that he may have been bribed by Signac or Fénéon: "M. Signac, who is very fervent and bold, has portrayed a model against a synthetic background of curves and associated tones, in which one must see, not the simple caprice of a colorist, but an experimental demonstration of the theories on color and line which will soon be published in a work by the artist in collaboration with M. Charles Henry." 22 Signac himself disliked the painting, though his response was likely colored by modesty. 23
5. Georges-Pierre Seurat (French, 1859–1891)

*Grandcamp, un soir* (*Grandcamp, Evening*).

1885, painted border c. 1888–89
Oil on canvas, 66.2 × 82.4 cm

Estate of John Hay Whitney, 1983

6. Georges-Pierre Seurat

*Le Bec du Hoc, Grandcamp*. 1885
Oil on canvas, 64.5 × 81.5 cm

Tate

“M. Seurat’s seascapes expand, calm and melancholic.
They ripple monotonously towards the distant horizon where the
sky falls. One rock rules over them—the Bec du Hoc.” —E. H.
7. Paul Signac (French, 1863–1935)
La Route Pontoise: L’Embranchement de Bois-Colombes, Opus 130 (The Junction at Bois-Colombes, Opus 130). 1886
Oil on canvas, 33 × 47 cm
Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds, England
“M. Paul Signac is drawn towards suburban landscapes. The canvases of his that date from this year are painted with tonal division; they achieve a frenzied intensity of light . . . in The Junction at Bois-Colombes (April–May 1886), the trees are scorched and wilt.” —f. f.

8. Paul Signac
Les Gazomètres. Clichy (Gasometers at Clichy). 1886
Oil on canvas, 65 × 81 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1948
“Gasometers at Clichy . . . with its picket fences laden with work trousers and jackets set out to dry, the desolation of its peeling walls, its scorched grass and its incandescent roofs in an atmosphere that asserts itself and darkens as it rises, hollowing out an abyss of blinding blue.” —f. f.
9. Albert Dubois-Pillet (French, 1846–1890)  
Forges à Ivry (The Forges of Ivry). 1888–89  
Oil on canvas, 8 ¹¹/₁₆ × 13 in. (22 × 33 cm)  
Musée d’Orsay, Paris

10. Henri-Edmond Cross (French, 1856–1910)  
Les Îles d’or (The Golden Isles). 1891–92  
Oil on canvas, 23 ³/₄ × 21 ¼ in. (59 × 54 cm)  
Musée d’Orsay, Paris
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon
11. Georges-Pierre Seurat (French, 1859–1891)
Le Chenal de Gravelines, un soir
(The Channel at Gravelines, Evening). 1890
Oil on canvas, 25 3/4 × 32 1/4 in. (65.4 × 81.9 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M. Burden, 1963

12. Paul Signac (French, 1863–1935)
Soleil couchant. Pêche à la sardine. Adagio. Opus 221
(Setting Sun. Sardine Fishing. Adagio. Opus 221)
from the series La Mer, les Barques, Concarneau (The Sea, the Boats, Concarneau). 1891
Oil on canvas, 25 1/8 × 31 7/8 in. (65 × 81 cm)

"Illustrating with their progress sluggish skies with graded harmonies, the boats here fan out in the morning, there, in calm weather, align the parallels of bare masts and oars in a distant Egyptian procession." —f. f.
Lisière de bois au printemps (Edge of the Wood, Springtime). 1882–83
Oil on wood, 6½ × 10¼ in. (16.5 × 26 cm)
Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Gift of Max and Rosy Kaganovitch, 1973
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

14. Georges-Pierre Seurat
Arbres, hiver (Trees, Winter). 1883
Oil on wood, 6⅜ × 9⅞ in. (15.4 × 25 cm)
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

15. Georges-Pierre Seurat
Le Petit Paysan en bleu (Young Peasant in Blue). 1882
Oil on canvas, 18¼ × 14¾ in. (46 × 38 cm)
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon
Le Faucheur (The Mower). 1881–82
Oil on wood, 6 1/2 × 9 7/8 in. (16.5 × 25.1 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Robert Lehman Collection, 1975
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

17. Georges-Pierre Seurat
Le Poulain (Foal). c. 1882–83
Conté crayon on paper, 9 3/4 × 12 1/2 in.
(24.8 × 31.8 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Robert Lehman Collection, 1975
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

18. Georges-Pierre Seurat
Les Meules (Haystacks). c. 1882–83
Conté crayon on paper, 9 1/4 × 12 1/2 in.
(24.1 × 32.4 cm)
Private collection
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon
19. Georges-Pierre Seurat (French, 1859–1891)
Paysannes au travail (Farm Women at Work). 1882–83
Oil on canvas, 15½ × 18¼ in. (38.7 × 46 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

20. Georges-Pierre Seurat
Paysanne assise dans l’herbe (Peasant Woman Seated in the Grass). 1883
Oil on canvas, 15 × 18¼ in. (38.1 × 46.2 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon
La Carriole et le chien (Carriage and Dog). c. 1882–84
Conté crayon on paper, 12 × 9 in. (30.5 × 22.9 cm)
Louise Reinhardt Smith Bequest, 1996
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

22. Georges-Pierre Seurat
Au crépuscule (At Dusk). c. 1882–83
Conté crayon on paper, 12 × 9 7/16 in. (30.5 × 24 cm)
Private collection
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

23. Georges-Pierre Seurat
Place de la Concorde, l’hiver (Place de la Concorde, Winter). c. 1882–83
Conté crayon on paper, 9 1/8 × 12 1/4 in. (23.2 × 30.8 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon
24. Georges-Pierre Seurat (French, 1859–1891)
Buste du dormeur (L’Homme au chapeau melon)
(Man in a Bowler Hat). 1883
Conté crayon on paper, 9 1/2 × 11 3/4 in. (24.1 × 29.8 cm)
Private collection
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

25. Georges-Pierre Seurat
La Zone (Fillette dans la neige—Le Grive)
(The Zone [Outside the City Walls]). 1882–83
Conté crayon on paper, 9 1/2 × 12 3/8 in. (24.1 × 31.5 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago. Harry B. and Bessie K. Braude Memorial Fund, 2018
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

26. Georges-Pierre Seurat
La Lune à Courbevoie: Usines sous la lune
(Factories by Moonlight). c. 1882–83
Conté crayon on paper, 9 5/16 × 12 1/4 in. (23.7 × 31.1 cm)
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon
27. Georges-Pierre Seurat (French, 1859–1891)

Poseuse de dos (Model from the Back). 1886
Oil on wood, 9 ½ × 6 ⅛ in. (24.4 × 15.6 cm)
Musée d’Orsay, Paris
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

28. Georges-Pierre Seurat

Poseuse de profil (Model in Profile). 1886
Oil on wood, 9 ¾ × 6 ⅜ in. (25 × 16 cm)
Musée d’Orsay, Paris
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon

29. Georges-Pierre Seurat

Poseuse de face (Model. Facing Front). 1886–87
Oil on wood, 9 ⅜ × 6 ⅛ in. (25 × 16 cm)
Musée d’Orsay, Paris
Formerly Collection Félix Fénéon