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FRENCH PAINTERS

IV—SIGNAC AND CROSS

BY H. E. BATES

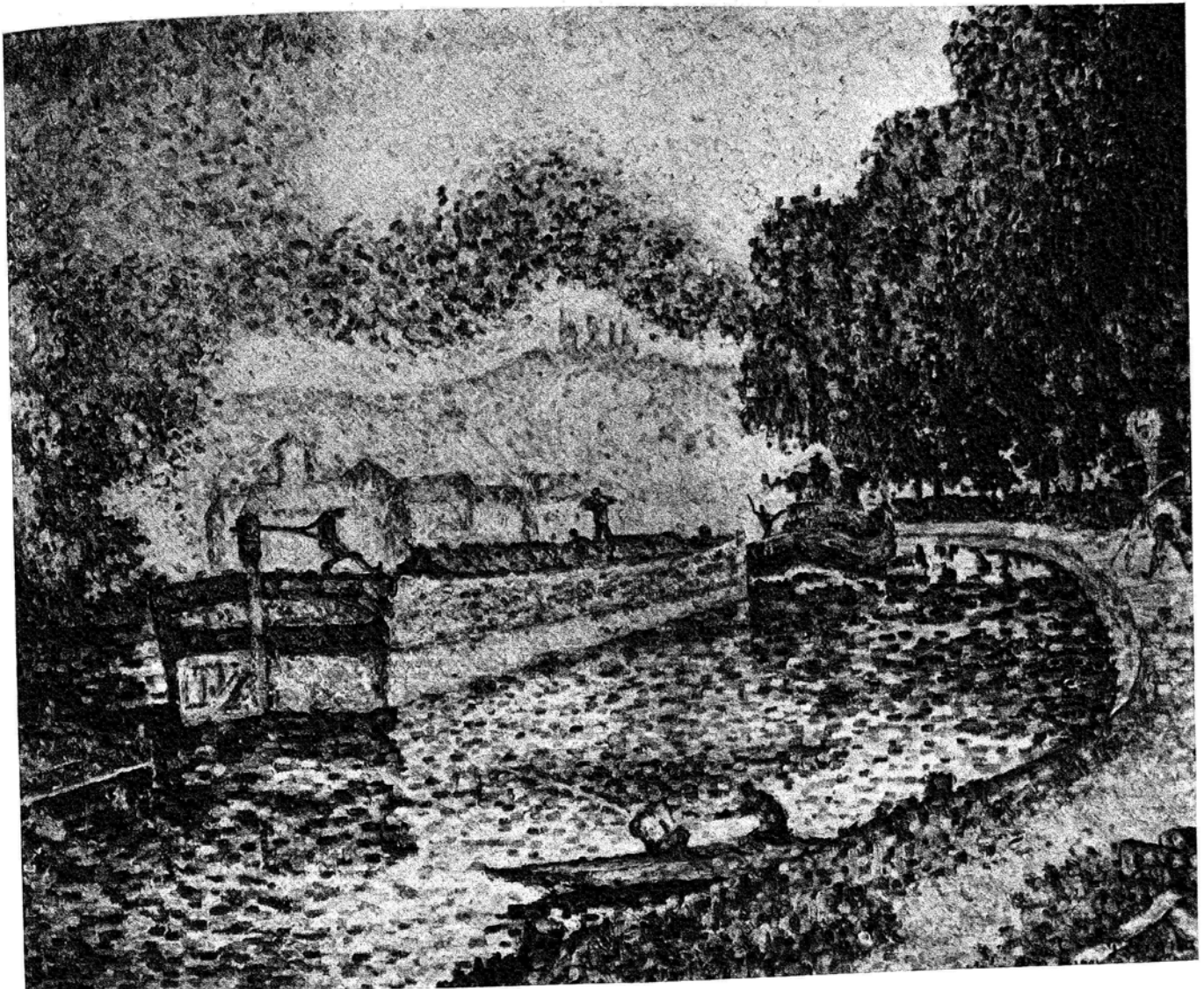


Fig. I. Remorqueur a Samoie, by Signac. Jacques O'Hana, Ltd.

It is just short of a hundred years, astonishing though it may seem, since Henri-Edmond Cross—né Delacroix, a fact I will explain later—was born at Douai, and rather less than that since Paul Signac, son of a Parisian draughtsman fond of ironically shaking his head at the sort of painting done by Monet and Degas and their friends, was born in Montmartre. If I lay some emphasis on the fact that the centenary of these two interesting and vivid painters is approaching it is not only because appreciation of their work, especially in this country, stands perhaps higher than it ever did, it is also because their work, arresting as the violent scintillation of its original impact must have been, still seems after all this long time to be as brilliant and startlingly fresh as the day they applied to the canvas, in pursuit of a theory that Pissarro called scientific Impressionism, their dots of pure colour, to achieve a mosaic of paint that we now describe, most generally, as Pointillism. Time has a way of sometimes dealing harshly with movements of painting that are rational and theoretical rather than instinctive and emotional. It has not done so with Signac and Cross. They have, in fact, achieved their own particular triumph over Time.

Impressionism, perhaps the most overworked word in the entire history of painting, has had many forms, and Signac's theory of Pointillism, or Divisionism, or Neo-Impressionism, or Chromoluminarism, or whatever out of these and other formidably ugly names you prefer to call it, has been described as first making "its appearance as the prolongation of Impressionism under a more academic aspect." It is easy to see that it derived, in fact, from Monet, of whom Signac had been a devoted admirer as early as twenty-one and to whom in fact he had written for advice after Monet's own one-man show in 1880. Signac had been much impressed, evidently, by those delicate comma-like punctuations with which Monet achieved fresh effects of subtlety in canvases like *Cap D'Antibes*, and of which Guillaumin was also a lesser if just as ardent an exponent. Events of extraordinary importance sometimes derive from the most casual meetings, and it seems to have been a meeting in the studio of Guillaumin at which Pissarro was first introduced to Signac, who in turn introduced him to someone who was really, in many ways, the master of them all: Seurat. That meeting gave Pissarro himself a change of outlook, a scientific means of canalising his emotions, whose effect is so sharp, and not always so

Fig. II. Pine Trees at Tropez, by Signac. Coll. Mr. Nathan Cummings.

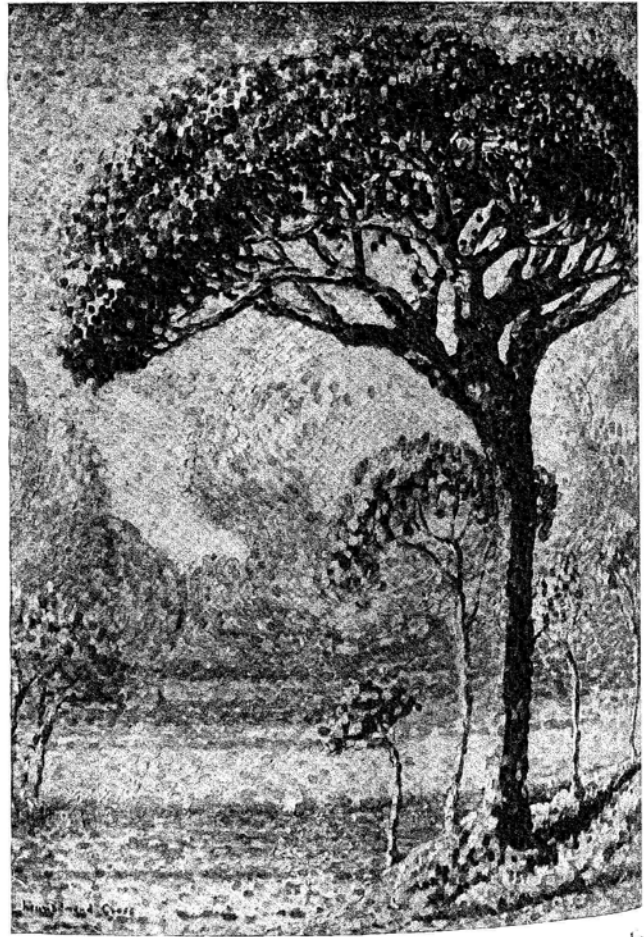


Fig. III (below). Pine Trees at St. Tropez, by Cross. Jacques O'Hana, Ltd.

very fortunate perhaps, in his later work. But Signac, the younger man, derived from Seurat much more. Out of their association springs the whole theory and practice of Pointillist painting.

If men whose importance to each other's lives are sometimes thrown together by the flimsiest of chances it is probably even truer that events of importance and even greatness sometimes spring directly out of the obtusest folly. The history of French XIXth-century painting is remarkable for two things: on the one hand the wonderful richness of it and the astonishing number of its exponents, of whom the scores of *petit-maitres* would alone have been a delight in any age, and on the other hand the number of blockheads who failed to perceive, from the day of Monet down through Pissarro and Van Gogh and Cézanne, what exactly was going on under their noses. This mass stupidity reached one of several climaxes in the year 1884, "when the Salon jury," as Mr. John Rewald has said, "once more attempted to strangle unorthodox efforts and when hundreds of rejected artists had come together and founded the Société des Artistes Indépendants. . . . Thus, more than twenty years after the Salon des Refusés, a permanent institution had finally been set up which took a stand against the abuses of power committed by the jury and opened its doors to all artists without discrimination. It was at the meetings in which the bylaws for this association were drawn up, and over which Odilon Redon presided, that Seurat and Signac had spoken to each other for the first time."

The subsequent meeting of the two men at the first Salon des Indépendants was more than interesting; for it was a case of the younger, lesser master telling the older and greater what to do. Signac, impressed by that vast canvas of Seurat's, "Une Baignade," for which the small preliminary outdoor sketches are some of the most wonderful and staggeringly expensive pictures in modern painting, at the same time pointed out to Seurat that his method of divisionism, of applying paint in juxtaposed spots of small size, was in a sense not pure enough. It allowed for the use of colours that were both pure and earthy. Signac wanted them all pure, like the colours of a prism, unsullied, unmixed with anything but white, not mixed in the palette or among



themselves. The true mixture of paint was in fact to be accomplished not manually, but optically. The eye—as indeed it finally always must—would complete the picture. Placed at a proper distance, the onlooker would be able to see the mass of divided dots run together and achieve an ultimate solidity that was in some curious way brilliant, austere, stable and serene.

This is the method that Signac went on to practise and

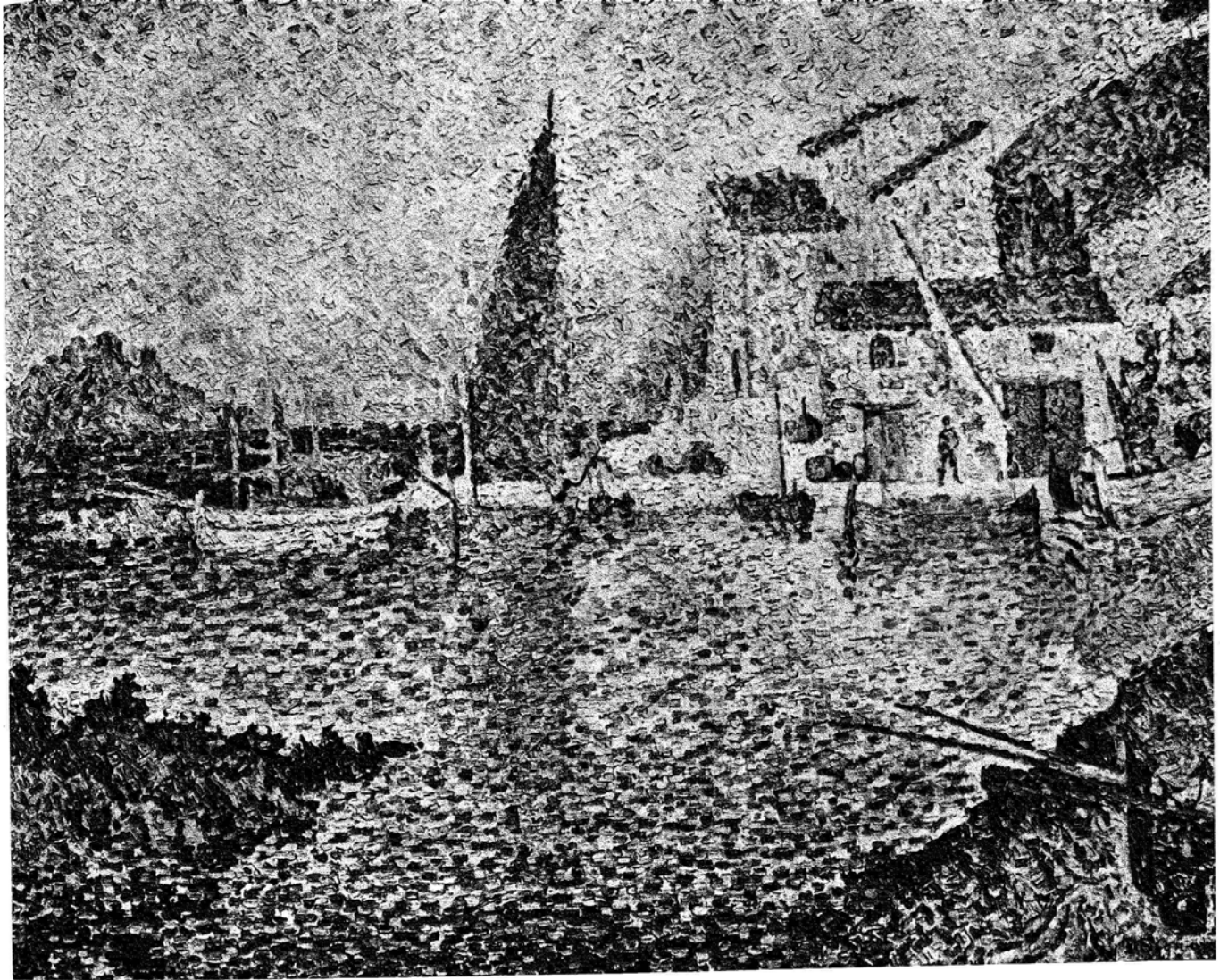


Fig. IV. La Port de la Pointe, St. Tropez, by Signac. Marlborough Gallery.

of which he became—because of Seurat's early death—the widest exponent. It is a method with obvious limitations, not least of which is the fact that it is physically laborious. Seurat spent more than a year on "La Grande Jatte," a vast canvas admittedly, for which he made scores of preliminary outdoor sketches, afterwards reversing all former Impressionist practice by completing the final picture in the studio. This change of practice is one of the keys to the divisionist extension of Impressionism. It meant that no longer was the artist interested only in snatching at transitory effects of light and air, of a particular moment, a tremulous accident of sun and water, and in trying to record it, on the spot, and yet with permanence, as much through the pressure of the emotions it roused as by the skill of his hand. The method of Pointillism was inevitably so slow and even tedious that it could not be exercised like that; it had to be much more an affair of emotion recollected in tranquillity; and it thus demanded, automatically, a stricter control, a greater insistence on structure and contour and an extreme rigour in the planning of colour, harmony and line. It could not be casual; and it posed a tremendous problem. Somehow the emotional impulse had to be subordinated to the slow scientific process of building the design and yet, at the same time, to be kept alive and fluid, so that the final canvas could show the joy of its permeation.

Derision for this method and its results was, it need hardly be said, long, loud and lamentable. The sort of minds that had not been able to appreciate the tender purity of Pissarro's early landscapes, for example, enjoyed themselves immensely in labelling a development that they had

not, as usual, really troubled to look at. It was called, among other things, a polychromatic rout, a dauber's joke, the small-pox technique, confetti-ism. Not one of these detractors could have had the simple sense to observe that in Pointillism the insistence on an underlying strength in draughtsmanship was an absolute essential to its success. Mere execution was not enough. Colour had to be, in a sense, subordinate to drawing. It had to be, for all its superficial and sometimes overwhelming polychromatic brilliance, the servant to design. Without design, without the skill of supreme draughtsmanship, it is perfectly obvious that Pointillism could descend as low as the mosaic of hotel lobby floors or chocolate boxes in aggravated and imitation petit-point. There is no virtue in mere brilliance of colour, however skilfully, explosively or arrestingly applied. It is the foundation of Signac's achievement as a painter that not only is he a poet, as Seurat is, in love with air and water and sea-skies and the play of light, but that he draws superbly. His sketches and aquarelles and even pastels, in the execution of which he went south to St. Tropez, west to Concarneau and as far north as Rotterdam, are always a delight.

If Van Gogh is an exception among other exponents of Pointillism, of whom the best known are Cross, Luce, the Pissarros and Petitjean, the last a painter of brilliance and charm whose centenary is also almost due, it has always seemed to me that Henri-Edmond Cross was the most interesting. He was born Henri-Edmond Delacroix, which was, as a French biographer has said, "*un nom difficile à porter; l'artiste le changea pour celui de Cross.*" His birth precedes that of Signac by seven years and he was thus on the verge

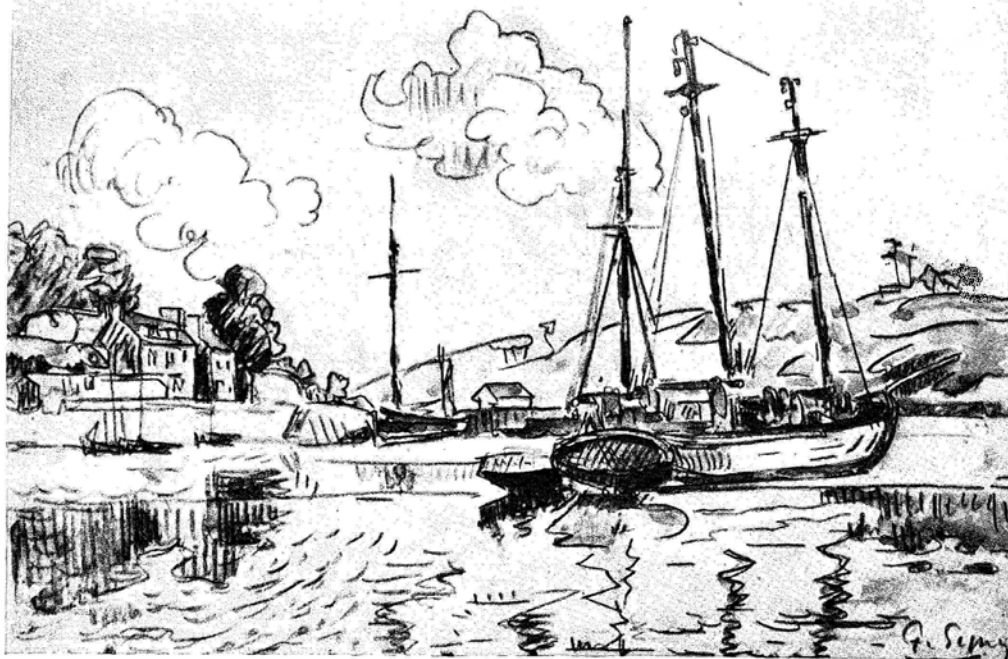


Fig. V. Landscape in Brittany, by Signac. *Gimpel Fils.*

of his thirties when Signac, who was not only a painter but a theoretician capable of expressing himself in prose, began to shape his theories in objective form. It was, by the way, not only critics and public who were, at the first showing of Seurat's "Grande Jatte" at the Salon des Indépendants, shattered into derision. Alfred Stevens, outraged and horrified, is said to have spent the entire afternoon collecting café friends and escorting them in groups to view the uncomfortable outrage. George Moore, poor man, was bewildered and goggle-eyed . . . "like mosaic . . . unrelieved by any attempt at atmospheric effect . . . strange, absurd, ridiculous."

Yet Moore, in his blundering way, put his finger on an

interesting feature of Pointillism that also discloses a weakness. He pointed out that although his long acquaintance with Pissarro made it possible for him to distinguish between the pictures of that painter and Seurat, "to the ordinary visitor the pictures were identical." The point is even more valid in the case of Signac and Cross. The sight of their work side by side establishes beyond doubt that one of the dangers of the Pointillist method, its very reliance on scientific theses, is that it makes for a disconcerting uniformity among its finished products. Cross appears sometimes so like Signac that one wonders whether the innovator of the whole business was not there, at the time of painting, to guide the



Fig. VI. Le Pont sur la Rance, near St. Malo, by Signac. *Jacques O'Hana, Ltd.*

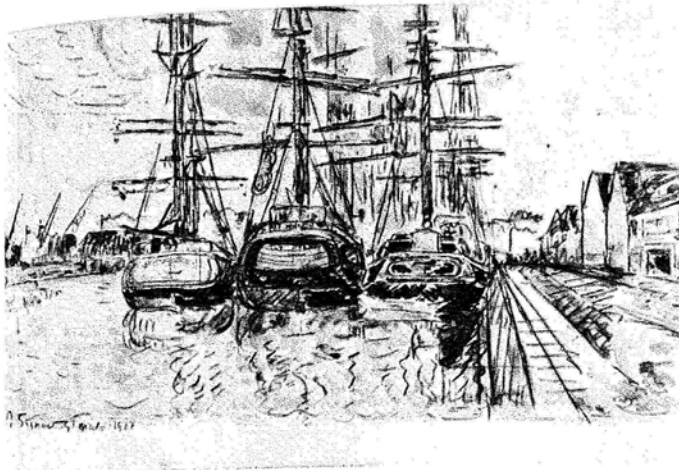


Fig. VII. Port du St. Malo, by Signac. Collection Maurice Harris.

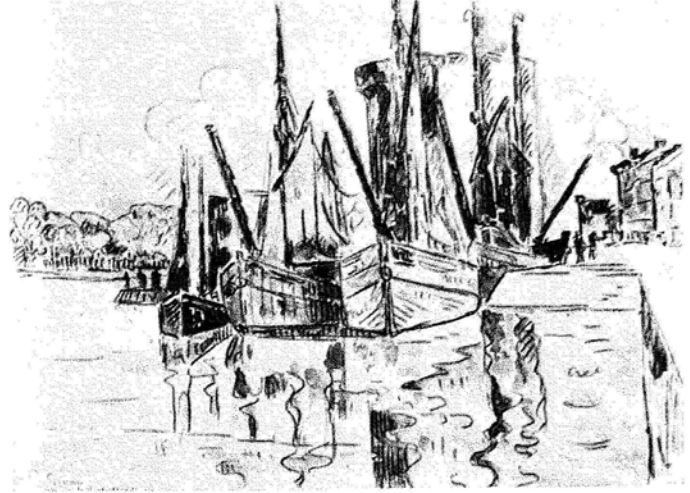


Fig. VIII. Port de la Rochelle by Signac. Collection Maurice Harris.

hand that held his brush. It is not true, of course, to say that the work of the two men is indistinguishable; but the limitation of the method, the very reason why it undoubtedly attracted so few exponents, is at once exposed. It becomes clear that only temperaments that were uncommonly forceful, gifted or in some other way passionately unusual, could hope to triumph over a method that could otherwise oppress them into a commonplace uniformity.

The difference between these exponents of Pointillism is therefore not so much a question of execution as of temperaments. It is not that one feels that of the two painters Cross is necessarily less skilled. As Signac is less austere than Seurat, so Cross is less austere and at the same time less determinate, than Signac. What has been called Signac's "super spontaneous enthusiasm" is missing in Cross. One feels that his nature is altogether less positive and buoyant, more delicate and reserved; he is a follower, a disciple, gifted and charming, rather than a master. Like Van Gogh, he began painting in subdued colours and then, in Pointillism, saw his light in the cloud; but unlike Van Gogh—and perhaps fortunately, for him—he is not hounded by clamorous demons driving him to frenzy. He remains one of those artists happily wrapped in the protective cocoon of a temperament that does not appear

to have been at all audacious. There is a lovely delicacy in some of his attempts to set down the subtleties of half-light, such as sunrise, that recalls Monet at his most tender. These, curiously enough, give no hint that he might have in him, as in fact he had, the power of anticipating and even influencing the Fauves, or that Matisse himself would in time make no secret of the fact of his interest in him. In whatever he did he never allowed it to be forgotten that he was, like Signac, a lyricist; and that his inspiration comes, like so much that is best in French art, from the sheer joy of air, of light and earth and sky and sun and especially of sea and water. A remarkable and intense luminosity gives both his canvases and those of Signac the scintillation and freshness of something painted yesterday. They have the quivering sparkle of gardens seen in intense sunlight after rain. If they do not always achieve the half-impossible triumph "by which reason might accomplish the work of instinct" that is not altogether surprising. How dull the Pointillist method could become in the wrong hands, backed by a wrong temperament, can be seen from so many of the flat and laboured efforts of Lucien Pissarro. Neither Cross nor Signac was Seurat, any more than Ibels was Lautrec. They could not help that, but it did not, fortunately, prevent them from painting joyfully.

List of the Paintings by Signac and Cross

illustrated in the Article

Remorqueur a Samoie (by Signac)
Fig. I. 31½ × 25 in. 1901.
Jacques O'Hana, Ltd., 9 South Bolton Gardens, S.W.5.

Pine Trees at St. Tropez (by Signac)
Fig. II. 25 × 40 in. 1907.
Collection Mr. Nathan Cummings, Chicago, Ill., U.S.A.

Pine Trees at St. Tropez (by Cross)
Fig. III. 25 × 19 in. 1907.
Jacques O'Hana, Ltd., 9 South Bolton Gardens, S.W.5.

La Port de la Pointe, St. Tropez (by Signac)
Fig. IV. 26 × 32 in. 1901.
Marlborough Gallery, 18 Old Bond Street, W.

Landscape in Brittany (by Signac)
Fig. V. Gimpel Fils Galleries, 50, South Molton Street, W.1.

Le Pont sur la Rance, near St. Malo (by Signac)
Fig. VI. 17 × 10 in.
Jacques O'Hana, Ltd., 9 South Bolton Gardens, S.W.5.

Port du St. Malo (by Signac)
Fig. VII. 17½ × 10½ in. 1928.
Collection Mr. Maurice Harris.

Port de la Rochelle (by Signac)
Fig. VIII. 14 × 10 in. 1931.
Collection Mr. Maurice Harris.

Two painters will be the subject of the next article by H. E. Bates in the June issue of APOLLO—Pissarro and Sisley.