veils of ghostly light with a flat design of immaculate clarity, but also his hypnotic peotry, which Seurat scholars have found analogous to the verse and imagery of such French Symbolist writers as Jules Laforgue and Arthur Rimbaud, who could also translate the gas-lit crowds of Parisian entertainment seekers into resonant metaphors of the timeless drama of human folly and loneliness, or of the mysterious confrontation of spectator and spectacle.

If, by 1888, Seurat's art was nuanced and elusive enough to be compatible with the subjective efforts of the Symbolist aesthetic of the 1880s to evoke a shadowy realm of feeling and imagination beyond empirical experience, it also revealed an even stricter program to conform to objective systems that would guarantee predictable artistic results and responses. In this, Seurat followed ideas proposed in 1885 in a treatise, *A Scientific Aesthetic*, by the then much talked about Charles Henry, who claimed that effects of sadness, serenity, and gaiety could be attained through the pictorial means of color and compositional direction (e.g., bright colors such as yellow and lines rising from the horizon evoke cheer; dark colors such as blue and lines descending from the horizon evoke gloom). Already in *La Parade* such theories are put into practice, and they become still more conspicuous in a later image of popular entertainment, *Le Chahut*, which Seurat showed at the 1890 Salon des Indépendants (fig. 404). Here, the spectator is abruptly thrust in front of a café act of frenzied hilarity, with a quartet of dancers performing the "chahut," a

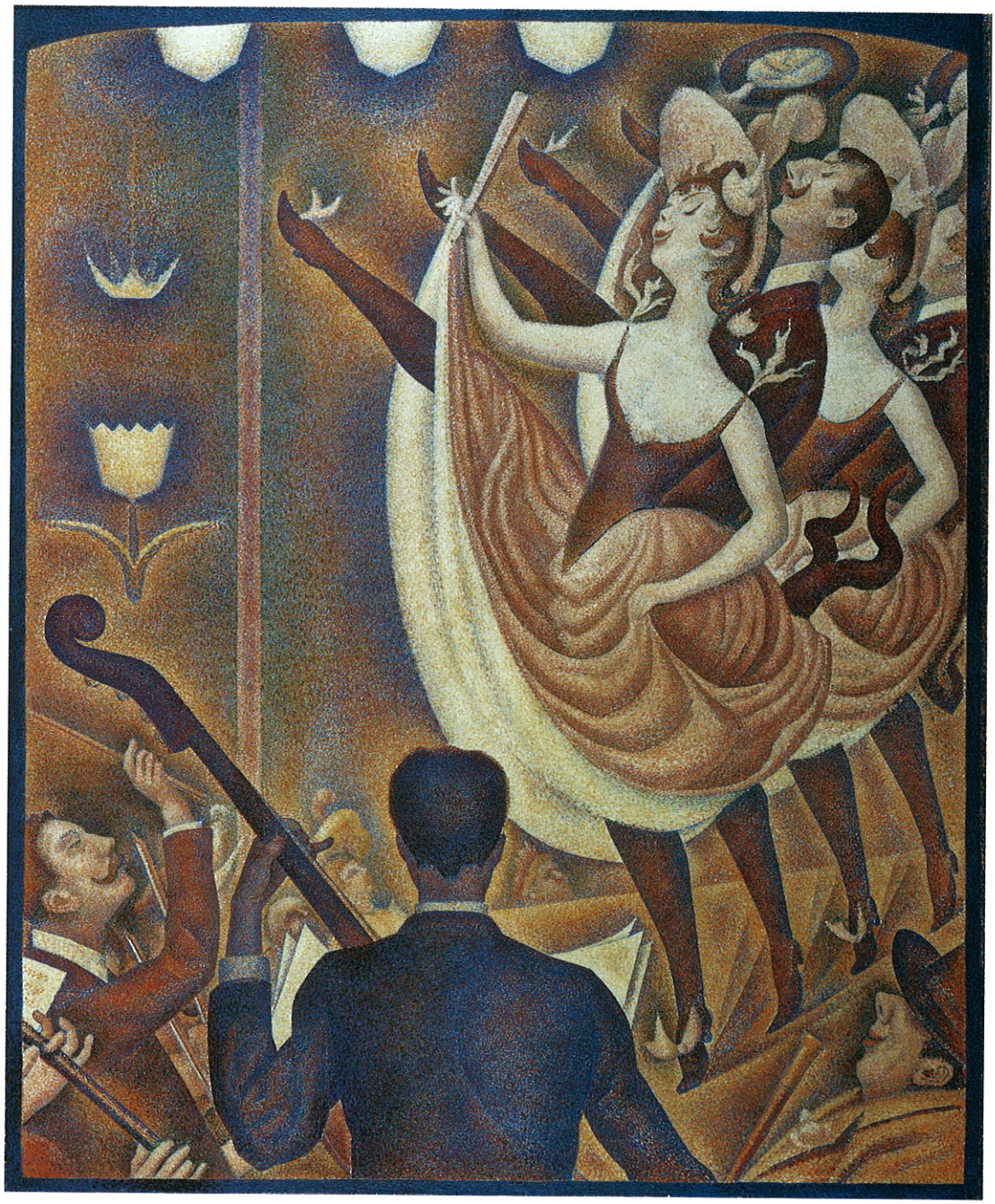

Fig. 404 **Georges Seurat**, *Le Chahut*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas, 66½ × 54¾". Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.

kind of cancan that had already become popular in France under Louis-Philippe. Again, the place and the event were real—a nightclub close to Seurat's studio called the Concert de l'Ancien Monde—and the high-kicking dancers themselves can be named; but these documentary details are metamorphosed into what becomes a frozen tableau of such repetitive geometric patterning that we might be looking at an Egyptian relief of dancers at a pharaoh's court. Henry's theories are evident throughout, from the large and small *V*-shaped patterns that crackle upward from the lower frame to the more intricate arabesques that decorate everything from the abstracted foliate shapes of the gas lamps to the curling ribbons and bows that fly up from shoes, shoulder straps, skirts, and mustaches. Yet so rigid are these emblems of giddy, popular entertainment that the performers become mechanical wind-up toys, almost diabolical in their mimicking of such human activities as music-making and dancing. As for the spectators, from the solitary man with a cane at the lower right to the figures who peer up from the other side of the stage, they respond in a no less automatized way, prophets of the recorded laughter that now punctuates radio and television comedies. Prophetic, too, is the chevron-like fracturing of light and shadow marked by the regular beat of the four pointed shoes that pierce the stage light, a passage that would be at home in the equally mechanized splinterings of light and motion explored by Futurist painters before the First World War. And here again, Seurat's art overlaps with the scientific concerns of his own time, for the split-second capture of this dancing quartet parallels the concern of photographers in the 1880s to document in a scientific fashion the actual movements of humans and animals in motion, step by step, hoof by hoof. It is telling that the painter Thomas Eakins was involved in these discoveries which would blur the boundaries between art and science; but the most sustained efforts to depict sequential motion were made by two photographers, the Anglo-American Eadweard Muybridge and the Frenchman Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904). A doctor who wished to expand his many published studies of physiology with more precise knowledge about the movements of muscles and bones, Marey observed not only human beings, but dogs, donkeys, horses, and birds, as if they were the flesh-and-bone counterparts to the mechanical marvels that visitors would be awed by in the Galerie des Machines at the Exposition Universelle of 1889, the year of Marey's first exhibition in Paris. His discoveries and innovations are clear in his "chronophotographs," the word he invented for his new process in which film and an electric photographic gun could record twelve images per second. In a characteristic example of 1886 (**fig. 405**), a uniformed French cadet runs past Marey's invention, spelling out, like Seurat's clockwork dancers, the regimented motion of his arms and legs. Never was the equation of the body and the machine made more clear; and, perhaps more important, never had the visual experience of the fusion of time and motion been diagrammed with such clarity. The consequences of this kind of scientific vision were enormous for art. The entire enterprise of the Italian Futurists, with their goals of depicting people, animals, and machines in rapid, sequential motion, was based on these photographic premises.

If Seurat's *Chahut* reflects the fascination with the mechanical body that fired the imagination of so many photographers in the 1880s, it also can be looked at as a late entry in a tradition best known through Degas's café and theater scenes. Both the foreground silhouette of the bass player and the odd corner segment of a flutist's hands are ideas compatible with the older master's vision. Yet this cross-section of a performance and its audience has been re-created through the eyes of a new kind of mechanized stage director who felt the pulse of industry and science even in the domain of dance, music, and laughter. The space, too, for all its croppings, has a strangely abstract quality, as if an elliptical volume, underlined by the subtle arcing of the upper framing margin, had encapsulated and immobilized the entire scene on both sides of the impossibly tilted stage floor. And the heraldic patterns of gaiety here have become so incisively flat and ornamental that we feel that the Seurat of 1890 had already invented most of the decorative language which, in the next decade, under the banner of Art Nouveau, would dominate everything from posters to subway stations.

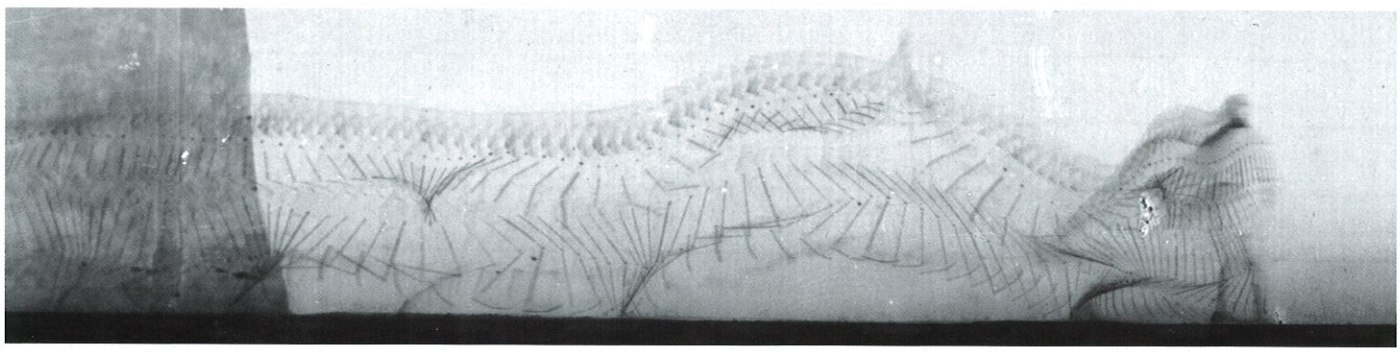

Fig. 405 **Jules Marey**, *Running Man*, 1886. Geometric chronophotograph. Collège de France Archives, Paris.

Fig. 406 **Georges Seurat**, *The Channel at Gravelines*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 29 × 36¾". Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Even in his late landscapes, this look of total, mechanized artifice would overpower Seurat's earlier orientation to an Impressionist world of sunlit grass and trees, and the green of nature would almost vanish from his palette. In the last summer of his life, that of 1890, he returned to the Channel coast and painted four views of the port of Gravelines. In one of these (fig. 406), the bleaching glare of a sunlit day reveals not nature, but the man-made forces that control these coastal waterways, as they were to do in two great engineering enterprises of Seurat's lifetime, the construction of the Suez and Panama canals under the direction of Ferdinand de Lesseps. Strangely devoid of human activity, this serene and silent scene is populated only by docked boats, whose relatively casual disposition is a foil to the absolute order imposed by the white shaft of the lighthouse, with its watery reflection, and the measured beat of the comparably cylindrical forms of the bollards that line the asphalt ground. The parabolic curve of this empty vehicular road then rushes us with startling velocity from foreground to remote horizon, yet remains almost an Art Nouveau surface pattern of attenuated curves that contrast with the rectilinear skeletons of the masts rising above the shoreline.

Seurat died on Easter Sunday, 1891, at the very time this painting was hanging on the walls of the Salon des Indépendants. Even in front of so modest a work, one wonders what the master might have done with the highways and bridges of the twentieth century, had he been granted a normal life-span. Still, in only a decade-long career, he managed to define, both for the 1880s and for generations to come, the possibility of reconciling the modern world of industry and technology with the highest reaches of artistic order and mystery.

Although his genius was inimitable, Seurat's pictorial techniques were not; and given his belief in an objective basis for the making of art, it was inevitable that he should attract a number of followers who could join him under the banner of Neo-Impressionism. Of these, Paul Signac (1863–1935) might be considered the group leader. Having met Seurat in 1884, he continued, after the master's death, to propagate this faith not only in his own paintings, but in a famous text, *From Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism* (1898), in which he outlined a distinguished pedigree for the progress of color theory and practice in the nineteenth century. Like Seurat, he often painted with his meticulous dots the bleak

industrial suburbs of Paris or the shipshape harbors of France; but he was also capable of satirizing some of the arcane, quasi-scientific theories of the period, as in his portrait of the leading proponent of Neo-Impressionism, Fénéon (**fig. 407**). The painting's full title is: *Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones and Colors, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890*, an affectionate spoof of the complex theories and diagrams published and discussed by Charles Henry in his efforts to rationalize the aesthetic structure of everything from Japanese prints to paintings by Degas. In it, Henry's fellow theoretician Fénéon is seen as a kind of modern Merlin, who holds top hat and cane in one hand, and a flower in the other, as if about to perform some magical transformation before a hypnotic central node from which banner-like ornamental patterns spiral outward in a diagrammatic inventory of colors and decorative motifs. Stars, astral globes, concentric crescents contribute to the comic effect of occult, exotic mystery, a setting appropriate, say, to the new cult of Theosophy that attracted so many artists. In fact, the painting contains many esoteric references intelligible only to the Signac circle. One knows, at least, that Fénéon was often noted to resemble "Uncle Sam," which may account for the reference to the stars and stripes behind him; and the flower, a cyclamen, may be a verbal pun on the fanlike, elliptical swirls of the background which seem generated by rotating cyclical rhythms. But apart from such intellectual jokes, the painting stuns us still by its daring espousal of so abstractly conceived and executed a decorative background, as if the schematic motifs of Seurat's late work, especially *Le Chahut*, had been extracted from their literal context and proposed as the dominant theme of a painting. Against this spaceless backdrop of Art Nouveau curves and stylized ornamental fillings, the profile portrait of Fénéon seems an old-fashioned intruder, polarizing almost too clearly that conflict between painting as representation and as abstraction which would become so complex an issue in the art and theory of the next decade.

In general, however, most Neo-Impressionist paintings that followed directly in the wake of Seurat were less flamboyantly adventurous, most often updating, with a progressive-looking technique, such familiar themes as landscape and genre. Outside France, it was Belgium that offered the most receptive audience to this new mode of painting, thanks in good part to a group of twenty liberal-minded artists who called themselves Les XX (Les Vingt) and who, from 1884 to 1893, held annual international exhibitions in

Fig. 407 **Paul Signac**, *M. Félix Fénéon in 1890*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 29⅛ × 36⅝″.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Brussels which, beginning in 1887 with the *Grande-Jatte*, presented to the Belgian public the latest works of Seurat, as well as of Signac. Immediate evidence of the impact of Neo-Impressionism can be seen in the early paintings of Signac's exact contemporary Henry van de Velde (1863–1957), who would later reach international prominence as a master of architecture and the decorative arts. In his *Woman at the Window* of 1889 (**fig. 408**), which was shown the following year both in Brussels at Les XX and in Paris at the Salon des Indépendants, there is nothing particularly modern about the subject, in which the indoor-outdoor contrast of a peasant woman and an open window view of the simplest country houses has deep echoes that go back to seventeenth-century genre painting in the Netherlands. Even more to the point, it restates a familiar motif of his older compatriot Henri de Braekeleer (1840–88), who, also from Antwerp and a student of Leys (see fig. 252) at the local academy, was steeped in nostalgic memories of art and life in the Low Countries before the Industrial Age. In his view of the *Place Teniers in Antwerp* of 1878 (**fig. 409**), a modern woman looks out from behind one closed window at the old, historic quarter of the city, crowned in the distance by the unfinished, late medieval church of St.-Jacques, a repository of paintings by Rubens and of Flemish tomb monuments. The subtly melancholic mood, a Realist restatement of Friedrich's *Woman by the Window* (see fig. 165), is almost an elegy for a dead and distant world, thoroughly effaced in the next decade by Seurat's pervasive modernity of style and subject. Van de Velde's painting implicitly maintains the quiet, passive tone of this contemplation of a vanishing past; but it also obliterates, as it were, Braekeleer's old-fashioned style in favor of a progressive new technique which, as he demonstrates here, can even record, as did his Realist predecessors, reflections on glass.

Fig. 408 **Henry van de Velde**, *Woman at the Window*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 43¾ × 49¼". Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts/Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

Fig. 409 **Henri de Braekeleer**, *Place Teniers in Antwerp*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 31⅞ × 25¼". Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts/Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

Quickly transformed into a symbol of pictorial modernity, Neo-Impressionism spread both inside and outside French borders, and its life-span, in varying guises, extended even into the domain of radical new directions in early twentieth-century art, speckling the canvases of Fauvists, Cubists, Futurists, and Orphists. And in the decade of its birth, the 1880s, its impact could be discerned even in the work of artists as anti-scientific in spirit as Gauguin and Van Gogh, those two masters who, together with Seurat and Cézanne, would become for later historians of modern painting a strangely dissimilar quartet of artist-heroes who could be categorized in chronological terms, if in no other way, as Post-Impressionists, artists, that is, who felt the need to construct private pictorial worlds upon the foundations of Impressionism.

Vincent van Gogh

Of these four artist-heroes, whose names would later be canonized in the legends of the founding fathers of modern art, it was the Dutchman Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) who