

Institution: University of Edinburgh		
Unit of Assessment: 32 (Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory)		
Title of case study: Shaping public perceptions and curatorial approaches to French Impressionists		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012 – 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name: Richard Thomson	Role: Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art	Period employed by submitting HEI: 1996 – ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2018		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Thomson's research on Seurat and Monet, disseminated through high-profile exhibitions, has shaped public perceptions of canonical artists and influenced the curatorial strategies of high-profile museums. <i>Monet & Architecture</i> (National Gallery, London, April – July 2018) attracted new audiences by exploring a novel theme in Monet's work – his representation of buildings. <i>Seurat's Circus Sideshow</i> (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February – May 2017) was the first exhibition in America to focus on a single work by Seurat and influenced the way canonical artists are represented and received. These exhibitions received over 330,000 visitors, generated over 18,000 catalogue sales and were reviewed in nearly 300 major national and international publications.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>There are two registers to the research: first, Thomson's art historical research into French Impressionism; second his curatorial research through major public exhibitions of French Impressionists. Thomson's approach to curation rejects the customary reliance on the fame of an artist and chronological surveys. Instead, he introduces new thematic perspectives that invite appreciation of the wider contexts of artistic production. This involves extended collaborative engagement with museums. Archival research enables the identification and securing of key loans, often of rarely shown or privately-owned works. For both <i>Seurat's Circus Sideshow</i> and <i>Monet & Architecture</i>, Thomson developed the underpinning concepts, selected the items for inclusion and authored the majority of the catalogues.</p> <p>Thomson's research into the representation of architecture in Monet's work offers a new framework for the reassessment of the artist [3.1; 3.2; 3.3]. This research formed the basis of <i>Monet & Architecture</i>, the first London-based exhibition of Monet's work since 1999. The exhibition challenged the conventional interpretation of Monet as a painter of landscape, gardens and the sea, and presented a means of interpreting Monet's important paintings of cities, and the way his treatment of architecture related to aspects of modernity such as the rise of tourism. It presented 78 paintings in three sections – 'The Village and the Picturesque', 'The City and the Modern' and 'The Monument and the Mysterious' [3.3].</p>		

Seurat's Circus Sideshow was grounded on Thomson's longstanding art historical research on Georges Seurat, including the artist's use of popular imagery [3.4]. For the exhibition, Thomson experimented with a curatorial approach focused on a single painting - Seurat's *Circus Sideshow* – his 1887-8 masterpiece depicting performers at a travelling fair in Paris. This involved juxtaposing the painting with examples of nineteenth-century art and visual culture (constituting almost fifty loans from public and private collections) [3.4].

Seurat's Circus Sideshow brought three new insights to Seurat's work:

1. By exhibiting artworks and images owned by Seurat, Thomson exposed the role of the artist's '*musée imaginaire*' in his artistic production.
2. By presenting contemporary naturalist paintings of circus performers (e.g., Fernand Pelez's *Grimaces et Misères*, 1888) Thomson underscored the irony and humour of Seurat's work.
3. By situating *Circus Sideshow* in relation to other period imagery, including popular illustrations and works by Daumier, Bernard, Rouault and Picasso, Thomson demonstrated the iconographic continuity of Seurat's work with other artistic interpretations of the travelling player as a metaphor for the social outsider.

3. References to the research

3.1. Thomson, R. (2016) 'Reconstruction and Reassurance: Representing the Aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War'. In *Monet. A Bridge to Modernity*, ed. Anabelle Kienle Ponka, Ottawa : National Gallery of Canada (October 2015-February 2016), 36-51. (Can be supplied by HEI on request)

3.2. Thomson, R. (2018) *Monet & Architecture*, National Gallery Company, London (distributed by Yale University Press). ISBN: 9781857096170. 248pp. 212 colour illustrations. (Submitted in REF2)

3.3. Thomson, R., (2012) *Art of the Actual: Naturalism and Style in Early Third Republic France, 1880-1900*, New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN 9780300179880. (Can be supplied by HEI on request)

3.4. Thomson, R., Stein, S.A., Hale, C. and Centeno, S. (2017) *Seurat's Circus Sideshow*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Yale University Press. ISBN 9781588396150. 144pp. 117 colour illustrations. (Submitted in REF2)

4. Details of the impact

Through the two exhibitions, *Monet & Architecture* and *Seurat's Circus Sideshow*, Thomson's research has:

1. Influenced curatorial strategy towards 'blockbuster' exhibitions.
2. Changed public perceptions of canonical artists, both through the exhibitions themselves and their extensive media coverage. The exhibitions were major successes, attracting a combined audience of 330,000 visitors and generating over 18,000 catalogue sales.

Monet & Architecture

Monet & Architecture was described by the Senior Exhibitions Manager at the National Gallery as 'surprising', 'innovative', representing an 'unexpected approach' and affording the

museum 'a new way of viewing established artists' [5.1]. The catalogue was reprinted within its first week on sale, selling over 15,000 copies in total, the third highest figure for the gallery in the past six years.

Attendance figures exceeded 190,000, surpassing the gallery's 170,000 target and 'considerably higher' than the last six Sainsbury Wing exhibitions. There were over 600,000 visitors to the exhibition's webpage during the exhibition. The public events programme attracted over 4,000 attendees [5.1], 'significantly higher and considerably larger' than usual.

The Curator of Post-1800 Paintings at the National Gallery noted that Thomson's proposal was selected for its 'original interpretation' of Monet that would 'appeal to a broad public'. He identified further benefits for the institution from *Monet & Architecture*: it 'advance[d] the reputation of the NG', led to 'a spike in new members, establishing a benchmark for how special exhibitions can drive patrons' involvement' and drew positive responses from the public to the 'intense, indeed emotional, museum experience' [5.2].

Monet & Architecture broadened public participation through 32 events [5.1]. The Head of Adult Learning at the National Gallery confirmed that an event for secondary school teachers 'made a huge difference to the [11] teachers in attendance' because it addressed a new A-level specification. Nearly 230 people attended related schools outreach workshops [5.3]. The Senior Exhibitions Manager noted that, '[t]he exhibition received very positive feedback from our visitors and of those canvassed, 70% thought the exhibition was excellent'. The exhibition website attracted 428,327 unique page views, 'considerably higher than other Sainsbury wing exhibitions' [5.1].

The exhibition attracted extensive press coverage, with 281 articles appearing nationally and internationally. It was described by the *FT* as 'rapturous', *The Guardian* as 'game-changing', *The Observer* as 'brilliantly selected' and *The Evening Standard* as 'very intense and completely successful'. The international press response was notable, with articles in *Die Welt*, *Le Monde* and *Le Monde Online*. *Le Tribune de Genève* described the exhibition as 'simple, dense et très efficace' [5.4].

Seurat's Circus Sideshow

140,000 visitors saw *Seurat's Circus Slideshow*. Between its opening in February through to late March 2017, it was the most visited of the exhibitions then open at The Met [5.5].

The Met testified that Thomson was appointed for 'his formidable reputation in the field' and for a 'novel' proposal that would 'resonate with the public' [5.6; 5.7]. The Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Met stated that Thomson's research on Seurat and 19th century visual culture 'was essential for the demonstrable success of *Seurat's Circus Sideshow*', which she described as 'a preeminent highlight within The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition programme' [5.8]. She noted that Thomson's 'highly influential curatorial vision' 'resulted in this important painting being seen afresh and resonating profoundly with scholars and the general public alike', setting a 'benchmark' for exhibitions of 19th century art. She testified to the impact of the exhibition on the museum's approach to curating masterworks, noting that its contextual framework 'set a new standard for "In-Focus" exhibitions at The Met, which have since been emulated by senior curators in other departments at the Museum. The Met has continued to present similar exhibitions focused on a singular work, most recently the 2019 exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci's Saint Jerome*. 'I am confident that my colleagues have been encouraged by the achievements of *Seurat's*

Circus Sideshow within both the scholarly and popular spheres during the development of Met exhibitions post-2017' [5.8].

The John Pope-Hennessy Chairman of the Department of European Paintings at The Met described the exhibition as 'a tour de force of contextual thinking and totally revelatory' [5.6]. The Curator of Nineteenth-Century European Painting stated that the exhibition offered a 'fresh perspective' of one of The Met's great masterworks' [5.7]. She further noted the 'accessible' nature of Thomson's catalogue essay [3.4], which will 'continue to advance understanding of the picture on the part of the general and scholarly public' and reach a broad public through the Met's online catalogue [5.7].

The accompanying exhibition catalogue has sold to date approx. 3,000 copies which, as the Publisher and Editor in Chief at the Met confirmed, 'for a publication accompanying a show of that size is more than respectable' [5.9]. It received several favourable reviews (*Times Literary Supplement*, *ArtNews*) and is still in print [5.10].

The exhibition received a significant amount of positive media reception: *The New York Times* called it 'enthraling' and 'a superb feat of contextualising' that succeeds in 'enhancing the understanding of Seurat's silent, magical painting.' *The Wall Street Journal* found it 'fascinating'; the *FT*, 'beguiling'; and *Art in America* commented that it was 'brilliantly selected', demonstrating 'myriad connections to art, society and politics'. For *ARTnews.com* it was 'a superb "In Context" exhibition' and for the *New Yorker Radio Hour* it was 'brilliant' and 'beautifully constructed' [5.10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1. Testimonials from Senior Exhibitions Manager at the National Gallery, London

5.2. Testimonial from The Neil Westreich Curator of Post 1800 Paintings at the National Gallery, London

5.3. Testimonial from the Head of Adult Learning at the National Gallery, London (during the period that *Monet & Architecture* was presented)

5.4. Collated press on *Monet & Architecture*

5.5. Attendance figures in email from the Senior Manager of Market Research, Marketing and External Affairs, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

5.6. Testimonial from John Pope-Hennessy Chairman. Department of European Painting, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

5.7. Testimonial from the Curator of Nineteenth-Century European Painting, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

5.8. Testimonial from the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

5.9. Email from the Publisher and Editor in Chief, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

5.10. Collated press on *Seurat's Circus Sideshow*