

# NORTON SIMON MUSEUM FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## *A Revolution of the Palette: The First Synthetic Blues and Their Impact on French Artists*

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**Pasadena, CA**—The Norton Simon Museum presents an exhibition that traces the effects of three synthetic blue pigments on French artists. The accidental discovery of Prussian blue in an alchemist's laboratory around 1704 helped open up new possibilities for artistic expression at the dawn of the Enlightenment. Through stunning works from the Simon's collection, alongside a handful of loans, *A Revolution of the Palette* explores the use of this pigment, followed by the introduction of cobalt blue and synthetic ultramarine, by French artists from the Rococo period to the threshold of Impressionism.



A new palette available to artists, thanks largely to the addition of Prussian blue in the 18th century, helped fuel the heated philosophical debates regarding Newtonian color theory. The fascinating new capabilities of artists to exploit sophisticated color relationships based on scientific optical principles became a core precept of Rococo painting, or *peinture moderne* as it was called at the time. Exquisite examples of the early use of Prussian blue by Fragonard and his immediate circle demonstrate their technical achievements. Paintings by Vigée-Lebrun, Prud'hon and Ingres show the masterful use of Prussian blue as Neoclassicism took hold. The sophisticated, subtle manipulations of color in academic painting of the period, exemplified by Ducis' *Sappho Recalled to Life by the Charm of Music* and Degas' early and ambitious emulation of a Poussin composition, *The Rape of the Sabines*, rely heavily on the ability of the new blues to deftly modulate tone and hue in ways never available to earlier painters.

Image: *Portrait of Theresa, Countess Kinsky*, 1793, Marie-Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (French, 1755-1842)  
Oil on canvas, Norton Simon Art Foundation

As revolutionary as this new greenish-blue color proved to be, Prussian blue was a mere precursor to the explosion of available colors brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, the French government played an active role in catalyzing innovation at the dawn of the 19th century, as the country emerged from the Revolution with its economy in disarray. The newly appointed administrator of the Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, Alexandre Brongniart (1770–1847), oversaw chemist Louis Jacques Thénard’s development of the next synthetic blue, a vivid cobalt blue pigment, inspired by the traditional cobalt oxide blue glazes seen on 18th-century Sèvres porcelain. An exquisite lidded vase on loan from the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens illustrates this.

The third synthetic blue to emerge was the culmination of centuries of searching for a cheap, plentiful, high-quality replacement for the most valuable of all pigments: natural ultramarine. This was a color derived from lapis lazuli, a rare, semiprecious gemstone mined almost exclusively in Afghanistan since the 6th century, and imported to Europe through Venice. It is famously known to have been more costly than gold during the Renaissance. Natural ultramarine provided a brilliant, royal blue hue, but only if coarsely ground and applied in a comparatively translucent glaze over a light-reflecting ground. Other blue colors, such as smalt, which was essentially composed of particles of colored glass, were available to help achieve the lovely hues of ultramarine, but the poor covering ability of the paint and the difficulty of its preparation and use were familiar limitations.

In 1824, the French government announced a competition among chemists to develop a true synthetic ultramarine. The prize was finally awarded in 1828 to Jean-Baptiste Guimet. Painters at last had an affordable, fully balanced palette of cool and warm colors spanning the full spectrum. This fact, combined with the innovation of ready-mixed tube oil colors, greatly facilitated the direct representation of nature. The ability of painters to capture a wide range of observed natural effects in the landscape *en plein air* are represented by the works of Corot, Guigou, Monticelli and Dupré. *A Revolution of the Palette* closes with two canvases representing the Impressionists’ full realization of the wide-open possibilities made possible by these new blues: Guillaumin’s *The Seine at Charenton* (formerly *Daybreak*) and Caillebotte’s *Canoe on the Yerres River*.

*A Revolution of the Palette: The First Synthetic Blues and Their Impact on French Artists* is curated by Conservator John Griswold. A series of events will be offered in conjunction with the exhibition. Information can be found at [nortonsimon.org/events](http://nortonsimon.org/events).

### **About the Norton Simon Museum**

The Norton Simon Museum is known around the world as one of the most remarkable private art collections ever assembled. Over a 30-year period, industrialist Norton Simon (1907–1993) amassed an astonishing collection of European art from the Renaissance to the 20th century, and a stellar collection

of South and Southeast Asian art spanning 2,000 years. Modern and Contemporary Art from Europe and the United States, acquired by the former Pasadena Art Museum, also occupies an important place in the Museum's collections. The Museum houses more than 12,000 objects, roughly 1,000 of which are on view in the galleries and gardens. Two temporary exhibition spaces feature rotating installations of artworks not on permanent display.

**Location:** The Norton Simon Museum is located at 411 W. Colorado Blvd. at Orange Grove Boulevard in Pasadena, Calif., at the intersection of the Foothill (210) and Ventura (134) freeways. For general Museum information, please call (626) 449-6840 or visit [www.nortonsimon.org](http://www.nortonsimon.org). **Hours:** The Museum is open Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from noon to 5 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is closed on Tuesday. **Admission:** General admission is \$12 for adults and \$9 for seniors. Members, students with I.D., and patrons age 18 and under are admitted free of charge. Admission is free for everyone on the first Friday of every month from 5 to 8 p.m. All public programs, unless stated otherwise, are free with admission. The Museum is wheelchair accessible. **Parking:** Parking is free, and no reservations are necessary. **Public Transportation:** The City of Pasadena provides a shuttle bus to transport passengers through the Pasadena Playhouse district, the Lake Avenue shopping district and Old Pasadena. A shuttle stop is located in front of the Museum. Please visit [www.cityofpasadena.net/artsbus](http://www.cityofpasadena.net/artsbus) for schedules. The MTA bus line #180/181 stops in front of the Museum. The Memorial Park Station on the MTA Gold Line, the closest Metro Rail station to the Museum, is located at 125 E. Holly St. at Arroyo Parkway. Please visit [www.metro.net](http://www.metro.net) for schedules.