
Sisley, Alfred

(b Paris, Oct 30, 1839; d Moret-sur-Loing, nr Paris, Jan 29, 1899).

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T079013>

Published online: 2003

British painter, active in France. Although overshadowed in his lifetime by Monet and Renoir, Sisley remains a quintessential representative of the Impressionist movement. He was almost exclusively a painter of landscape.

1. Life.

Alfred Sisley was born into a family of Anglo-French descent, the second of four children following the marriage of William and Felicia Sisley who were cousins. His father was director of a business concerned with the manufacture of artificial flowers, which collapsed as a result of the Franco-Prussian War (1870); his mother is said to have been musical. Sisley inherited British nationality from his father, but he made two unsuccessful attempts (1888 and 1898) to become a naturalized French citizen. He lived in France all his life, apart from the years 1857–61 when he was sent to London by his parents to train for a business career. Shorter painting expeditions to Britain were undertaken in 1874, 1881 and 1897. He married Marie Lesouezec in 1866 by whom he had two children, Pierre (1867–1929) and Jeanne (1870–1919).

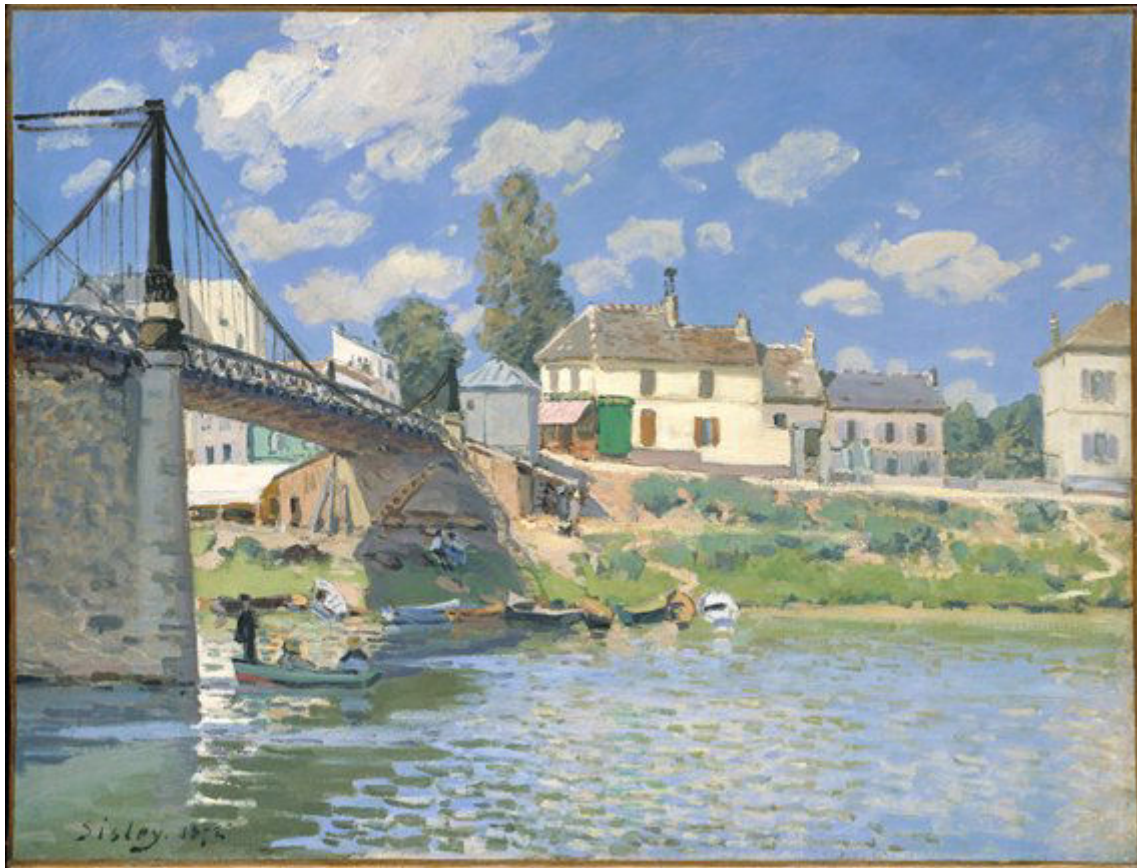
Although based for a time in Paris, Sisley moved to Louveciennes in 1871 during the period of the Commune and tended from that time to remain aloof from life in the capital. He continued to live to the west of Paris near the banks of the Seine until 1880, moving the short distance from Louveciennes to Marly-le-Roi in 1875 and then again to Sèvres in 1877. In 1880 he moved further away from Paris, settling to the south-east not far from the forest of Fontainebleau, where he had first painted in 1863 and 1865. Here he established himself successively in villages near the confluence of the Loing and the Seine: Veneux-Nadon (1880), Moret-sur-Loing (1882), Les Sablons (1883) and finally back to Moret-sur-Loing (1889).

The financial security of Sisley's early life was in marked contrast to the hardships that set in during the 1870s. It is probable that Sisley was forced to make his living as a painter because of the failure of his father's business, and this situation brought with it the pressure of the constant need to sell his paintings. Unlike some of the other Impressionist painters, Sisley suffered financial difficulties to the end of his life. Although promoted by such dealers as Paul Durand-Ruel, Georges Petit and Goupil (Boussod & Valadon), and although he participated in the Impressionist exhibitions (except those of 1879, 1880, 1886) and was a member of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts founded in 1890, his work did not dramatically increase in value during his lifetime. Sisley therefore remained dependent on the generosity of his friends and a small group of patrons, such as Jean-Baptiste Faure, who financed his visit to England in 1874, and Félix François Depeaux. Similarly, Sisley's work was appreciated and discussed by only a small number of critics, notably Théodore Duret and Adolphe Tavernier. Added to the financial anxieties of his later years was the constant pain of a fatal illness diagnosed in 1895. He died of cancer of the throat in January 1899, a few months after his wife's death.

2. Work.

Sisley's firm commitment to painting began only in 1862, when he joined the studio of Charles Gleyre, which Monet, Renoir and Frédéric Bazille also attended. It is not known what, if any, formal training Sisley had had before this date. The four years (1857-61) spent in England may not all have been devoted to business studies, and it is feasible that a burgeoning landscape painter may have looked at the work of Turner and Constable, whose *Cornfield* (exh. RA 1826; London, N.G.), for example, is distantly echoed in one of Sisley's early pictures, *Road near a Small Town* (c. 1865; Bremen, Ksthalle). Virtually no research has been done on Sisley's links with earlier French, Dutch or English painting.

After Gleyre's studio closed in 1863, Sisley often worked with Monet, Renoir and Bazille, depicting motifs in the forest of Fontainebleau. His first paintings are surprisingly strong, revealing a debt to the Barbizon school, but also an independence that corresponds, to a certain extent in the brushwork and directness of observation, with Monet's early development, for example *Chestnut Trees at La Celle-Saint-Cloud* (c. 1865; Paris, Petit Pal.). Sisley's paintings were accepted for the Salons of 1866 (*Village Street at Marlotte: Women Going to the Wood*, 1866, Tokyo, Bridgestone A. Mus.; and *Village Street at Marlotte*, 1866, Buffalo, NY, Albright-Knox A.G.), 1868 (*Avenue of Chestnut Trees at La Celle-Saint-Cloud*, 1867; Southampton, C.A.G.) and 1870 (*Barges on the Canal Saint-Martin*, 1870, Winterthur, Samml. Oskar Reinhart; and *View of the Canal Saint-Martin*, 1870, Paris, Mus. d'Orsay) but were refused in 1867 and 1869.



Alfred Sisley: *The Bridge at Villeneuve-la-Garenne*, oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 25 3/4 in. (49.5 x 65.4 cm), 1872 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ittleson Jr, 1964, Accession ID: 64.287); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110002133>

While he was living in Louveciennes and Marly-le-Roi, Sisley's output increased dramatically, and his style of painting became quintessentially Impressionist in the application of pure colour with broken brushstrokes and in the treatment of light (see fig.). This style is seen at its finest in paintings of Louveciennes (*Early Snow at Louveciennes*, 1870; Boston, MA, Mus. F.A.), Marly-le-Roi (the *Waterworks of Louis XIV at Marly*, 1873; Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyp.), Argenteuil (*Bridge at Argenteuil*, 1872; Memphis, TN, Brooks Mus. A.) and Bougival (the *Hillsides at Bougival*, 1875; Ottawa, N.G.). There are numerous similar examples. During his visit to England in 1874, Sisley explored related motifs along the banks of the River Thames, for example the *Bridge at Hampton Court* (Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Mus.) and *The Thames with Hampton Church* (Radier Manor, Jersey). All these paintings of the first half of the 1870s are characterized by carefully balanced compositions, supple handling of paint and eloquent tonal nuances. Their luminosity is enhanced by the extremely delicate range of colours, often pastel shades of blue, green and red. This period of Sisley's work, with its harmony and subtlety, can be considered one of the outstanding moments in Impressionism. Camille Mauclair (1904) declared that Sisley was 'the painter of great blue rivers curving towards the horizon, of blossoming orchards, of bright hills and red-roofed hamlets scattered about; he is, beyond all, the painter of French skies, which he presents with admirable vivacity and facility'. Yet, paradoxically, as Mauclair concluded, it is perhaps these fine paintings of the early 1870s more than any others in the painter's oeuvre that have caused Sisley to be dismissed as merely 'a pretty colourist'.



Alfred Sisley: *View of Saint-Mammès*, oil on canvas, 455×730 mm, c. 1880 (Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, Acquired by Henry Walters, 1909, Accession Number: 37.355); image credit: The Walters Art Museum

Sisley, like Monet, continued to explore the Impressionist style during the 1880s and 1890s. By the end of the 1870s his brushwork had become more vigorous and his palette more varied. Duret (1902) referred to Sisley's 'power of expressing the smiling mood of nature', asserting that his 'originality was principally shown in a novel and unexpected coloration', which the critic described as 'a rose-tinted lilac blue'. The combination of loose rhythmical brushstrokes and vibrant colours (blue, green, orange, yellow, red) gives the paintings of the late 1870s and early 1880s their originality. Among these are *Watering-place at Port-Marly* (1875; Chicago, IL, A. Inst.), *Street in Louveciennes* (c. 1876; Cambridge, Fitzwilliam), *View of Saint-Mammès* (c. 1880; Baltimore, MD, Walters A.G.) and the *Path to the Forest of Roches-Courtant at By—Summer* (c. 1880–81; Montreal, Mus. F.A.). Such pictures were undertaken at a time when Sisley hoped to exhibit once more at the Salon where he was rejected in 1879.

At the beginning of the 1880s, while fellow Impressionists, such as Pissarro and Renoir, were concerning themselves more with the human figure, Sisley continued to concentrate on the fugitive effects of light and atmosphere. Compositionally, he placed great emphasis on the sky, regarding this as the most active part of a landscape, which served to fuse together the other elements. For the close examination of the landscape under changing conditions, Sisley began to restrict himself to a limited number of motifs, mainly at Saint-Mammès and Moret-sur-Loing. Examples include his series of paintings of the *Church at Moret-sur-Loing* (six date from 1893 and eight from 1894), inspired by Monet's series of *Rouen Cathedral* (see fig.). Earlier, in 1876, Sisley had painted six canvases of the *Seine in Flood at Port-Marly*, and in 1885 he depicted the *Loing Canal at Saint-Mammès* in a number of closely related pictures notable for their smaller, more regular brushstrokes and brighter palette, so the principle of painting in series was not new in his work. Yet there is a clear distinction between Monet's paintings of *Rouen Cathedral* and Sisley's of the *Church at Moret-sur-Loing*. Where Monet allowed the architecture to be enveloped by light and atmosphere, Sisley exercised strict control over the architectural forms and was content to record the play of light or the changing temporal effects on them. For Sisley, fugitive effects never resulted in the dissolution of forms; instead they helped him to define form more precisely.



Alfred Sisley: Sahurs Meadows in Morning Sun, oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 36 1/4 in. (73 x 92.1 cm), 1894 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Janice H. Levin, 1991, Accession ID: 1991.277.3); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110002136>

In general, Sisley's later work is characterized by a variety of brushstrokes and intensity of colour that originates in Impressionism but at the same time transcends it. Outstanding examples of his late style are *Haystack at Moret, October* (1891; Douai, Mus. Mun.) and *Haystacks at Moret: Morning Light* (1891; Melbourne, N.G. Victoria), where the powerful forms of the haystacks stand out against trees and sky. Such pictures confirm Bibb's opinion (1899) that in his early work Sisley 'had carried forward and filled with new life the exquisite tradition of Corot; in his later manner he was preparing the way for future discoveries'. Though Sisley did not belong to any of the movements that evolved out of Impressionism, he was aware of them. His detachment led to the development of a highly individual style that does not suffer on comparison with Monet's (see fig.). In modern criticism Sisley has been unjustifiably overshadowed by his contemporaries, regardless of the fact that earlier writers and friends recognized the significance and originality of his contribution to painting. When Pissarro, for instance, was asked by Matisse in 1902 'What is an impressionist?', Pissarro replied 'An impressionist is a painter who never paints the same picture, who always paints a new picture'. This prompted Matisse to ask 'Who is a typical impressionist?' He was given the answer 'Sisley' (A. H. Barr: *Matisse: His Art and his Public*, New York, 1966, p. 38).

Sisley did not concern himself unduly with theory, yet the only recorded opinions about his painting, made in an extended letter to Adolphe Tavernier in 1893, are surprisingly relevant for the development of modern art. A single quotation may serve as an example of its interest:

The animation of the canvas is one of the hardest problems of painting. To give life to the work of art is certainly one of the most necessary tasks of the true artist. Everything must serve this end: form, colour, surface. The artist's impression is the life-giving factor, and only this impression can free that of the spectator. And though the artist must remain master of his craft, the surface, at times raised to the highest pitch of liveliness, should transmit to the beholder the sensation which possessed the artist.

Sisley was principally a landscape painter. He produced few still-lives and scenes portraying specific activities or events. There are no formal portraits, and in only two of his paintings are members of his own family closely depicted, *The Lesson* (c. 1872) and *Woman with a Parasol: Summer Scene* (1883; both priv. col., see Daulte, 1959, nos 19 and 485). Drawings and prints are limited in number. Only a few preparatory studies for pictures seem to have survived, in addition to a group of informal studies of his family. Some sheets, mostly drawn in pen and ink, were made for reproduction, while others, principally the important sketchbook (Paris, Louvre), record painted compositions. Pastel appears to have been used on several occasions during the 1880s and 1890s, for example *Landscape: Riverbank* (1897; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay), which is related to a lithograph of the same subject published by Ambroise Vollard (1897). The contents of Sisley's studio were sold at the Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, in 1899.

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