

A Pure Impressionist, Alfred Sisley's Evolution Traced at Bruce Museum

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by Susan Hodara

GREENWICH, C.T. — “[Alfred Sisley](#) (1839-1899): Impressionist Master,” an exhibition of 50 paintings at the [Bruce Museum](#) abounds with light. It shines from expansive skies and glimmers as stippled reflections in the waters of the Seine. It sets aglow a blossoming meadow and, elsewhere, the façade of a 13th-century church. It shapes elongated purple shadows cast by trees, a murky haze over a snow-covered road.

But this is more than a collection of pretty pictures. Curated by MaryAnne Stevens, an independent Sisley scholar, the show traces the evolution of Sisley's practice and tracks his movement through the Île-de-France countryside around Paris. “Impressionist Master” is the artist's first retrospective in the United States in more than 20 years.

On a recent afternoon, Stevens led a small group through the galleries. Comparing Sisley to his fellow Impressionists, including [Pierre-August Renoir](#), [Claude Monet](#) and [Camille Pissarro](#), she described Sisley as “a pure Impressionist.” A dedicated landscape artist throughout his career, he remained committed to working en plein air in front of his subject, and to translating light into color in order to capture fleeting moments with paint.

Some of the paintings in “Impressionist Master” have rarely, if ever, been exhibited, and help viewers trace the artist's development. Included among these is the earliest work in the show, *Spring, Peasant under Trees in Blossom*, from 1865-1866. In the painting, which depicts a young woman engulfed in an orchard of flowering trees, Sisley's brushstrokes are heavier and broader than they would be just a few years later.



"Spring, Peasant under Trees in Blossom" by Alfred Sisley, 1865-66. Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 56 cm. Galerie Bailly, Geneva. Image courtesy of Galerie Bailly, Geneva.

Standing beside *Boulevard Héloïse, Argenteuil*, from the winter of 1872, Stevens noted the moody ambiance imbued by Sisley's paint: pale pinks, oranges and blues along the bustling boulevard, leading back to a diffused haze. "He is capturing the atmosphere, the activity and the quality of light," she said. "The sound is muffled. We really do feel that we're in a misty, slightly foggy February morning."

Stevens, former librarian, head of education and curator at the [Royal Academy of Arts](#) in London, pointed out several traits that distinguish Sisley, one being his sensitivity to greens. Commenting on the palette in *The Route de Verrières*, a tree-filled scene also painted in 1872, she said, "We have an artist who is acutely aware that when he looks at a motif made up of nature, he is looking not at a single green, but a whole gamut of greens ... He's got this gradation that is really remarkable."



“The Route to Verrières” by Alfred Sisley, 1872. Oil on canvas, 47.5 x 63 cm. Private Collection, Thomas Gibson, England.

Another strength is Sisley’s treatment of the sky. In some pieces, it is blue with cottony clouds; in some it is bleak and foreboding; in others it is tinged with the rosiness of sunrise. But all of Sisley’s skies are alive with the essence of season, weather and time of day.

Stevens remarked on the paintings’ dimensionality. “He starts building up the sky in an architectonic way,” she said. “... It has sculptural form, and as such, it takes a dynamic role within the landscape.”

One example is the river landscape *The Bridge at Saint-Mammès*, completed in 1881. The painting is divided horizontally, the river and its banks below, a blue sky flecked with clouds in shades of mauve and gold above. As Stevens said, “You have a sense of the sky literally arching up over our heads.”



"The Bridge at Saint-Mammès" by Alfred Sisley, 1881. Oil on canvas, 54.6 x 73.2 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection, 1917 (Cat. 1082). Image courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Although little remains to document Sisley's life, in an 1892 exchange with the critic Adolphe Tavernier, Sisley wrote: "The sky must be the medium, the sky cannot be a mere backdrop ... I always begin by painting the sky."

Of significant interest is Sisley's method of exploring a site, of systematically repositioning himself to produce a series of images that define the location visually from assorted perspectives. Stevens called the artist's approach "proto-cinematic."

In "Impressionist Master," this process is evident in several groupings, among them four works made in Marly-le-Roi, where Sisley moved in the mid 1870s. His house was set below a manmade pool known as an *abreuvoir*, or watering place, that was part of the network that supplied water to the nearby chateaus at Versailles and Marly. This *abreuvoir* became a focal point for Sisley, framed from different vantages in different seasons and conditions.

Fête Day at Marly-le-Roi depicts the approach to the watering place and the stone wall surrounding it on a rainy afternoon. The subject is seen from above, probably from a window in Sisley's home, Stevens suggested, where he would have been forced by the rain to paint indoors.



"Fête Day at Marly-le-Roi" by Alfred Sisley, 1875. Oil on canvas, 54 x 73 cm. The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum, Bedford. Image courtesy of The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum.

Grouped with *Fête Day* are *The Watering Place at Marly-le-Roi* and *Winter Day at Marly*, two ground-level views of roads heading away from the watering place. Stevens explained that Sisley was pivoting, first facing the street that led to the town of Louveciennes, and then shifting west, toward Port-Marly.

Both scenes are snow-covered, but each exudes a unique sense of temperature. In the former, the ice in the pool is breaking up, and Sisley employs a feathery brushstroke to create an atmospheric mist. In the second, the brushwork is sharper, making tangible the cold crispness of the wintry air.

Finally, in *The Watering Place at Marly - Hoarfrost*, Sisley has swiveled south. The painting, another snowy scene drenched in blues with touches of peach-toned light, encompasses the stone bollards that encircle the abreuvoir and the adjacent houses and trees. "He's looking round, again under snow," Stevens said, "but this time, snow on a late afternoon, because the sun is coming from the west."

"That pattern of stalking a particular motif, of working his way through a landscape, or around a landscape," Stevens said, "is exactly what I think sets him apart."

"Impressionist Master" organizes Sisley's development into four sections: The Formative Years: 1865-70, The Years of Impressionism: 1870-1877, The Years of Transition: 1877-1880 and The Years of Maturity: 1880-1899. Choose any of the paintings and look closely at its brushstrokes. In

the earlier works, they are fuller, slower, less confident, perhaps. Moving through the years, they become lighter, more dappled, applied more rapidly as if driven by the desire to preserve the ephemeral.

The exhibition closes with *The Cliff at Penarth - Evening, Stormy Weather*, made in 1897 while Sisley and his family were visiting Wales. The composition is sliced diagonally, on the left a foaming sea, on the right the cliff where Sisley was situated. The sky is ominous, laden with weather; the vegetation along the edge of the cliff is tossed by a wind that the viewer can feel in the frenzy of Sisley's brush.

Sisley, who was 57 at the time, was ill, and his wife was in the final stages of cancer. Within 18 months, both would be dead.

"Tantalizing" was the word Stevens used to describe the painting. "When you look at something like this," she said, "you find yourself thinking, 'Where's he going to go next?'"

The answer can never be known, but "Impressionist Master" does a careful job of showing—geographically, technically and artistically—where Sisley had been and what he had done there.

BASIC FACTS: "Alfred Sisley (1839-1899): Impressionist Master" is on view January 21 through May 21, 2017, at the Bruce Museum, 1 Museum Drive, Greenwich, CT 06830.

Docent-led tours at the Bruce are on Tuesdays 1:30 to 2:30 p.m. and Fridays 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. For details and information about related programming, including a lecture series, graduate symposium and film screenings, visit www.brucemuseum.org.

After closing at the Bruce, the show will travel to Aix-en-Provence, France where it will be on view at the Hôtel de Caumont Centre d'Art from June through October, 2017. The exhibition is co-organized by the Bruce Museum and France-based Culturespaces.

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