

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Flood at Port-Marly by Alfred Sisley



Title:	The Flood at Port-Marly
Maker:	Alfred Sisley (1839-1899)
Medium:	Oil on canvas
Date:	1876
Dimension:	h. 46.1 x w. 55.9 cm
Museum No:	PD.69-1958
Gallery:	5

Key Dates for Sisley

1839	Born into family of Anglo-French descent
1857	Moves to London for four years to train for business career
1862	Joins Paris studio of Charles Gleyre, meets Monet, Renoir and Bazille
1863	Works <i>en plein air</i> with same artists in forest of Fontainebleau
1866	Marries Marie Lesouezec, has two children in 1867 and 1870
1870	Franco-Prussian war, collapse of family business which led to financial hardship for Sisley
1871	Moves to Louveciennes, close to banks of Seine
1874	Painting expedition to England – explored river motifs along banks of River Thames
1875	Moves to Marly-le-Roi
1876	PAINTS SEVEN CANVASSES OF THE SEINE IN FLOOD AT PORT MARLY
1880	Moves further out near to forest of Fontainebleau
1885	Series of paintings of Loing Canal at Saint Mammès
1893	Writes extended letter to critic Adolphe Tavernier – only recorded opinions of his own paintings.
1893-4	Series of paintings of church at Moret-sur-Loing
1899	Dies from cancer of the throat

Sisley was essentially a landscape painter, as many of the Impressionists were. Having met at Gleyre's studio in 1862, Monet, Renoir, Bazille and Sisley made painting trips into the forest of Fontainebleau in 1863 specifically to paint *en plein air*. This means painting a landscape on the spot where you see it. Traditional landscapes had been produced by sketching on the spot, and then returning to the studio to complete the landscape from the observational sketches. In the 1850s and 1860s there were artists such as Daubigny, Cals and Boudin who were pioneering the painting of landscapes in the open air, and these works are often small and show a lively handling of paint which reflects the speed at which they were working. The Impressionists were to take this working practice and develop it. Ideally an Impressionist landscape should show a place as it looked at a particular moment under certain weather and daylight conditions, and it should have only taken as long to paint as it took to see the scene.

The early 1870s brought a time of anxiety and financial insecurity for Sisley, but it also provoked a sustained period of painting activity for him, and led to the production of what many people consider to be a series of great Impressionist paintings. The paintings from these years are noted for their carefully balanced compositions, supple handling of paint and a subtle and delicate range of colours.

Port-Marly lies on the left bank of the Seine and Sisley painted there from 1871. He painted a flood in 1872, and then returned to paint the extensive flooding in the spring of 1876 which he painted seven times. By painting the same subject several times he was able to concentrate on how to represent the quality of the reflections in the water in the changeable spring weather. This painting shows the flood gradually receding, and is dominated by the muddy tones of the water and the blue-grey of the clearing sky. The trees give a sense of perspective to the painting and they contrast with the very strong horizontal emphasis of the punts in the foreground.

The interest in painting a single subject several times was something that Sisley had in common with Monet. During the 1880s Monet went on a series of painting expeditions to Normandy, Brittany and the Mediterranean coast. On one of these trips to the west coast of Brittany, Monet produced no less than 39 paintings of the same bit of coast in just ten weeks. In the 1890s Monet was to take this principle even further in what are known as his 'series' paintings of *Grainstacks*, *Poplars* and the *West Façade of Rouen Cathedral*. In these, the actual subject became a vehicle for the real point of the paintings, which was to show the widely varying effects of light, atmosphere and weather conditions upon these familiar objects. Although Sisley did not

follow Monet to these extremes, he was to develop his own practice of working in series. In 1885 Sisley depicted the Loing Canal at Saint-Mammès in several pictures. These show his style developing with smaller, more regular brushstrokes and a brighter palette. In 1893-4 Sisley returned to the subject of the Church at Moret-sur-Loing no less than fourteen times. Both of these series show Sisley continuing to be fascinated by the varying effects of light and atmosphere on the landscape and its architecture.

Sisley is often felt to be underrated by modern audiences. When Pissarro 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?' The reply came, 'Sisley'.