



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

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*Alfred Sisley*

DAN SCOTT



# Alfred Sisley

## The Overshadowed Impressionist

I don't write about Alfred Sisley as much as I should. Despite being one of the figure-heads of Impressionism, he is overshadowed by some of his more famous contemporaries, such as Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. In light of this, I wrote this ebook about Sisley's life and art.

*“Every picture shows a spot with which the artist has fallen in love.”*

Alfred Sisley



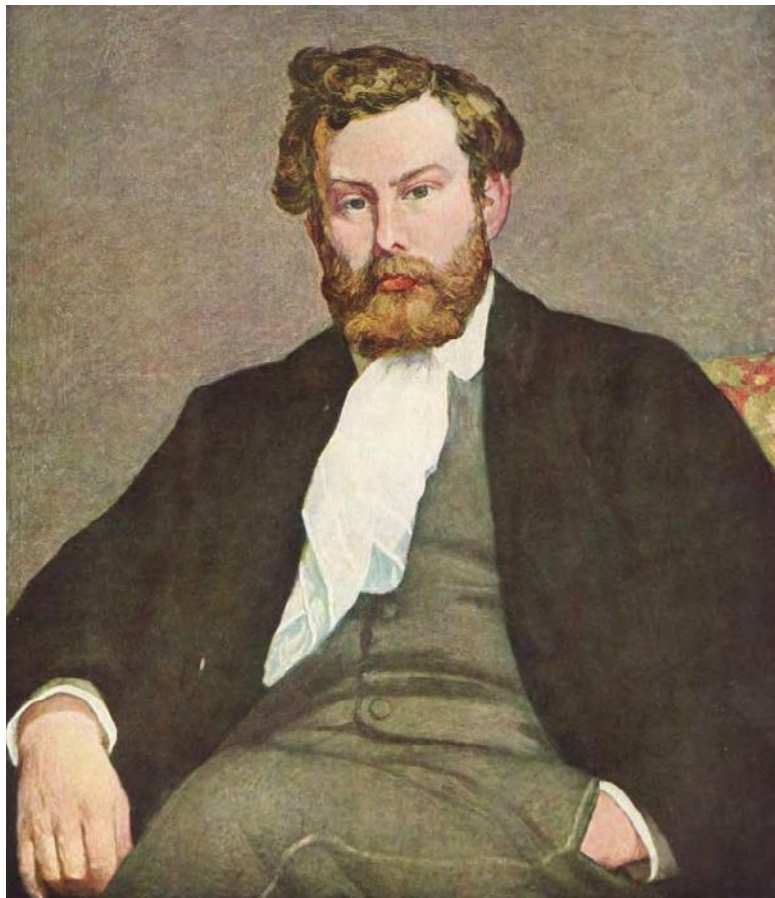
Alfred Sisley, *A Path at Les Sablons*, 1883



# Key Facts

## Here are some interesting facts about Alfred Sisley:

- He was born in France to a wealthy British family. His early art career was supported by his father, who was in the silk business.
- He moved to London in 1857 to study business but quit and moved back to Paris after four years.
- He began his formal art studies in 1862 when he enrolled in the atelier of Charles Gleyre, a skilled artist and teacher. It was there he met Monet, Renoir, and many other now-famous artists who also studied under Gleyre. Below is a portrait by Renoir featuring Sisley during his early days as an artist (I was unable to find any of Sisley's student works unfortunately).



*Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Portrait of Alfred Sisley, 1864*





- He received an allowance during the 1860s from his father to support his art, putting him in a much better position than many of his contemporaries.
- In 1868, his *Avenue of Chestnut Trees Near La Celle-Saint-Cloud* was accepted to the Salon exhibition in Paris. His work was rejected from the Salon in 1867 and 1879.



*Alfred Sisley, Avenue of Chestnut Trees Near La Celle-Saint-Cloud, 1867*

- In 1870, the Franco-Prussian War ruined his father's business and forced Sisley to support himself from his own art sales. He spent the rest of his life as a poor man, as his art was not really appreciated until after his death (as is the case with many artists sadly).
- He applied for French citizenship twice but was rejected the first time and illness intervened the second time. This may explain his lack of success during his lifetime. Being a British citizen born in France, he was torn between two cultures, unable to establish himself firmly within either. This reminds me of the Australian Impressionist, John Russell, who spent most of his time painting in France but was not fully embraced by their culture like other Impressionists.
- He died on 29 January 1899 of throat cancer at the age of 59. During his lifetime, he created around 900 oil paintings, 100 pastels, and many drawings.



# A Closer Look

## at Alfred Sisley's Paintings

Sisley painted mostly calm landscapes in a typical Impressionist style, with simple forms, broken color, and a colorful palette. His work is similar to that of Monet, but his use of color was much more restrained.



*Alfred Sisley, The Terrace at Saint-Germain, Spring, 1875*



*Alfred Sisley, Fog, Voisins, 1874*

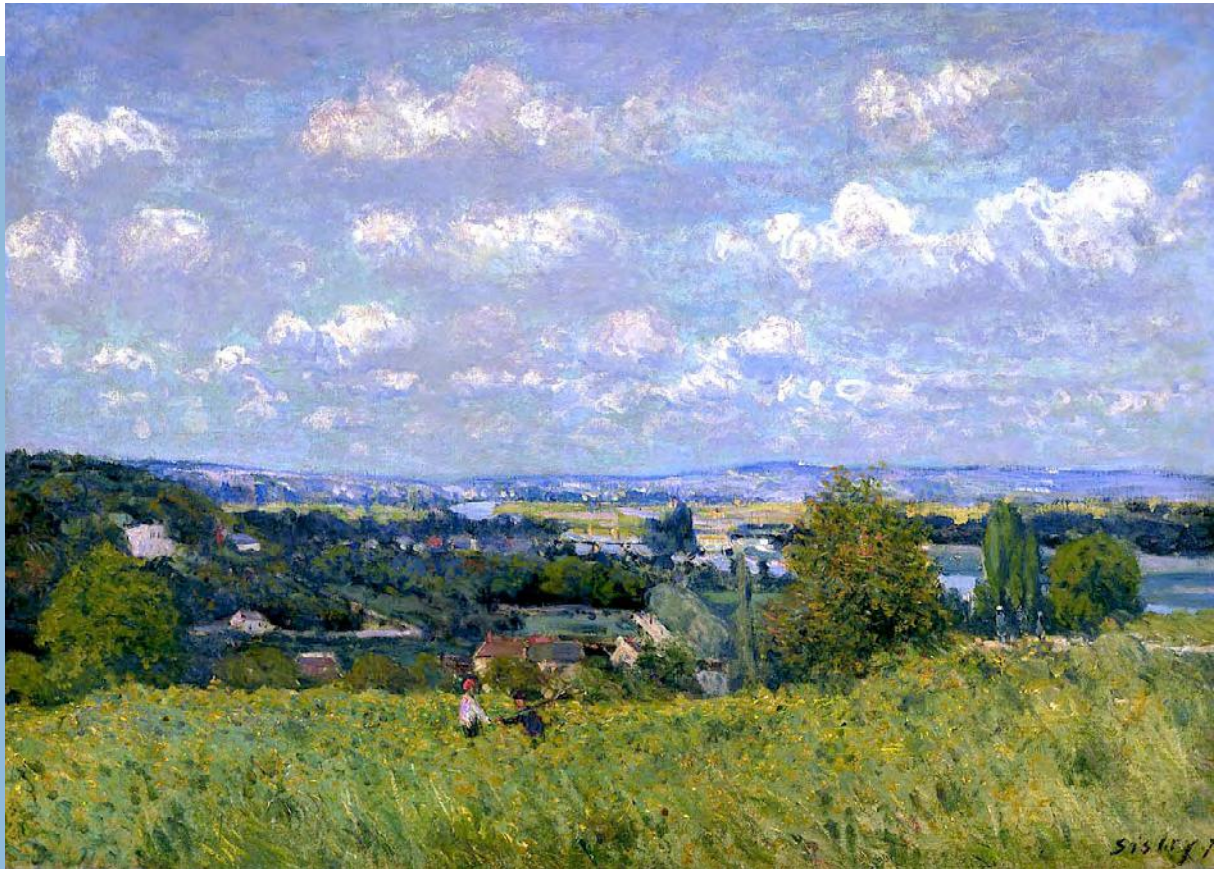
In some cases, Sisley was too restrained in his use of color. The foggy depiction below, whilst perhaps accurate, is not much to look at in my opinion.





I prefer when Sisley *pushed* the color a bit more, like in the painting below. There is a strong feeling of light in this painting as a result of:

- Near-white highlights used for the clouds;
- Value contrast between the lights and darks. The stronger the contrast, the stronger the light source appears; and
- Temperature contrast between the lights (warm) and darks (cool).



*Alfred Sisley, Landscape on the Banks of the Seine, 1875*

*The Moret Bridge, Storm Effect* is a dramatic painting with rich, distinct colors and energetic brushwork. The dark colors used for the buildings and bridge contrast against the bright clouds. On the bridge, you can see two people making their way across, painted with nothing but a few strokes of black.

The water is picking up all kinds of reflections: the highlights from the clouds, the blue of the sky, the grays and blues of the building. The regular brushwork creates a sense of movement in the water. Also, notice the white highlights scumbled across the



top of the water to indicate whitewater. This is a simple but effective technique which gives the water a sense of realism. Without these highlights, it might be difficult to tell where the water ends and the land starts.



Alfred Sisley, *The Moret Bridge, Storm Effect*, 1887

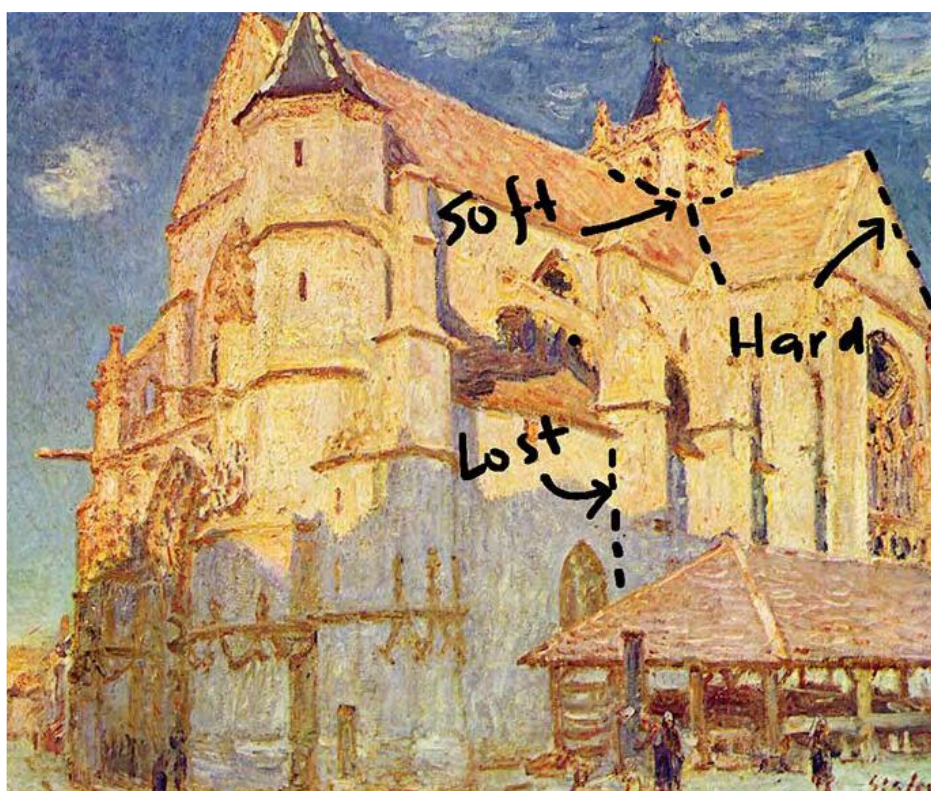
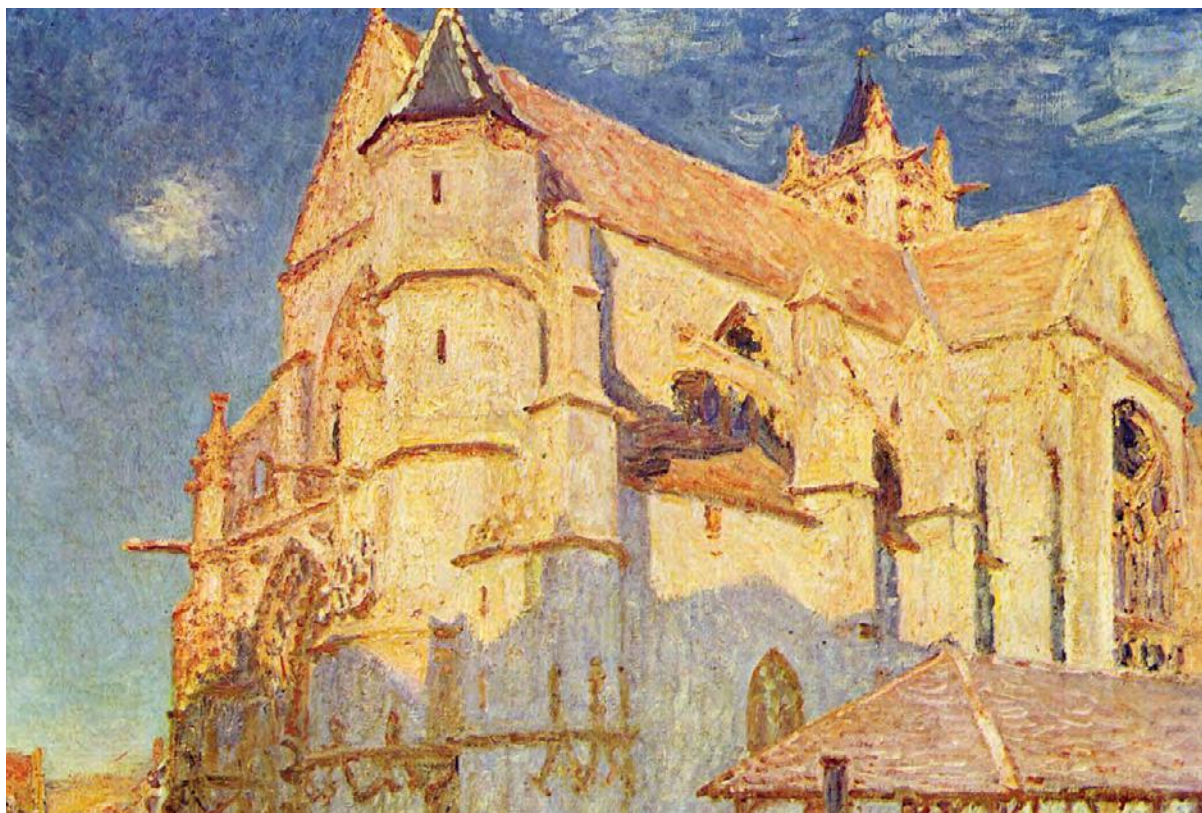
Outside of pleasant, sweeping landscapes, Sisley also painted rigid architecture from time to time, like *Church in Moret* (next page). Here are a few of my observations about the painting:

- It is a great demonstration of how light and shadow affect the colors we see. The building itself has a near-white or light gray local color, but under the warm light of the sun, it *appears* bright orange. In shadow, it *appears* like a dull purple.
- There is a pleasing contrast between warm lights and cool shadows.
- Although Sisley painted with rough brushwork, his drawing was still very accurate.
- The use of hard, lost, and soft edges is incredibly important for conveying a sense of realism about the building. Hard edges suggest an abrupt change, from light to



dark, or from the building to the sky. Soft edges suggest a gradual or subtle change, like the transition between two planes of the building which are both hit by light. Lost edges suggest the whole area is in shadow or hit by a bright light.

I indicate some of the different hard, soft, and lost edges in this image.



Alfred Sisley,  
*Church in  
Moret, 1889*

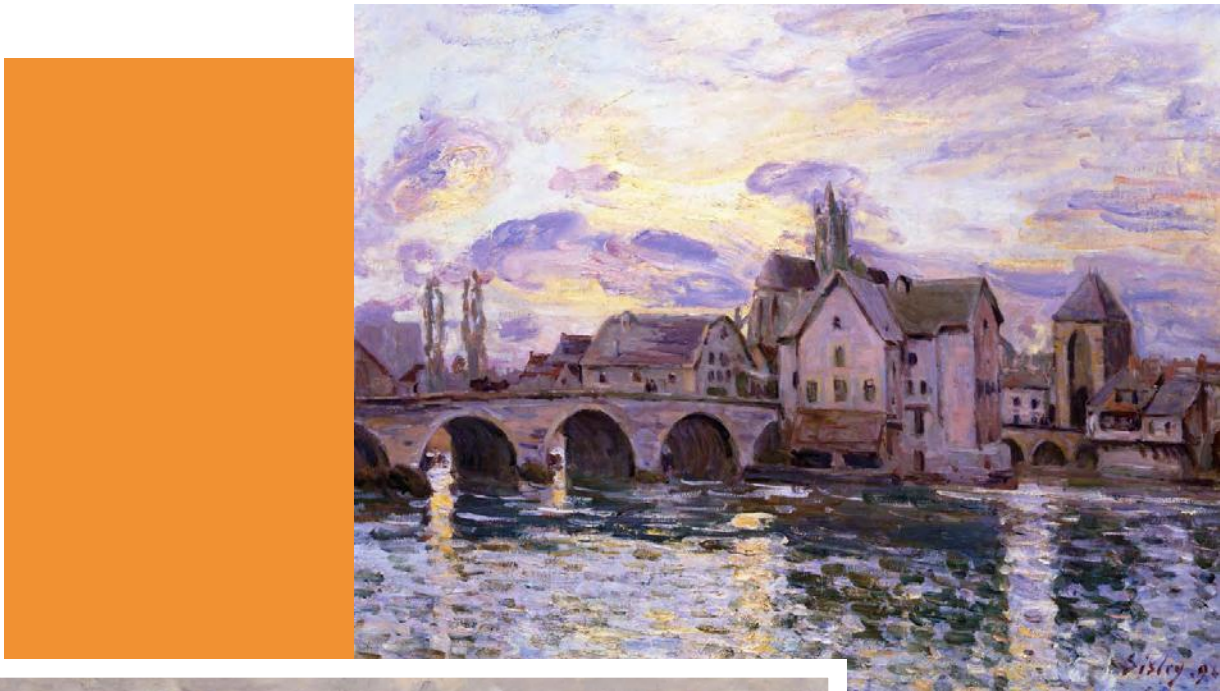
Sisley was fairly restrained with his use of color in *The Bridge at Moret at Sunset*





(many of the other Impressionists really *pushed* the colors in their sunset paintings).

The sky is made up of a pleasant contrast between rich purples and light yellows and blues. Sisley used broken color to depict the water, which is reflecting the dark shadows and the colorful sky. This type of brushwork contrasts against the solid brushwork used for the architecture.



*Alfred Sisley, The Bridge at Moret at Sunset, 1892*



*Alfred Sisley, Footbridge at Argenteuil, 1872*

In *Footbridge at Argenteuil*, notice the lack of rendering Sisley used for the people; nothing but simple color shapes. But, the *right colors* and shapes in the *right places* can convey a significant amount of information about the subject, even without any of the finer details.

This painting is also a great demonstration of linear perspective. Notice how all the lines used for the footbridge converge towards a vanishing point in the distance.





The painting below reminds me of Monet's haystacks series. Haystacks were a popular subject with the Impressionists, probably because they were so effective at demonstrating light and shadow.

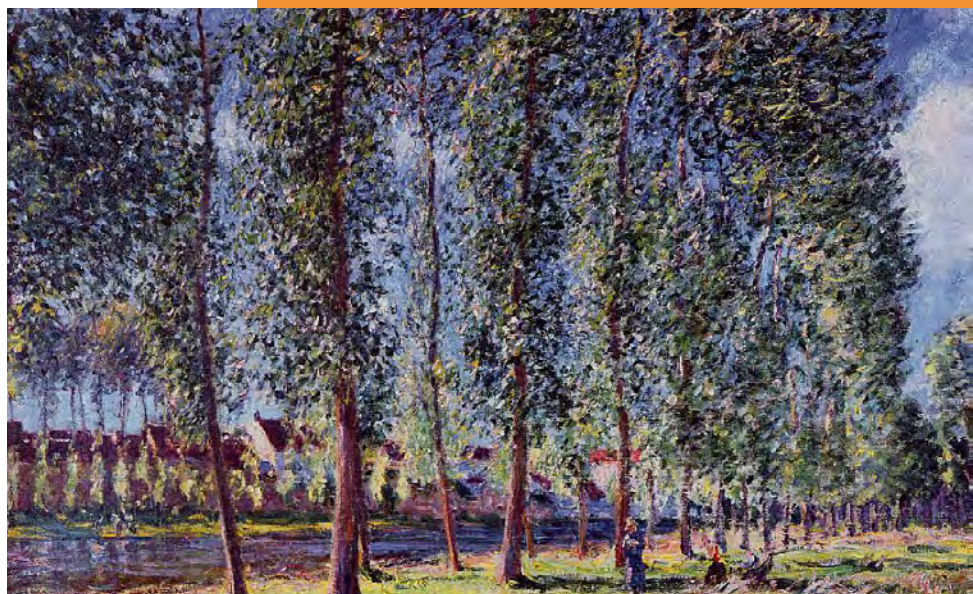


*Alfred Sisley,  
Haystacks, 1895*

The Lane of Poplars at Moret is an interesting play between positive and negative space. The positive space being the trees and the negative space being the sky, clouds, and houses in the background.

Interestingly, this painting has been stolen on three separate occasions, most recently from the Musée des Beaux-Arts in 2007.

*Alfred Sisley, The  
Lane of Poplars  
at Moret, 1888*





I love in the painting below how the woman resting along the stream almost blends in with the rest of nature. Also, notice how the woman's dress still appears white, despite no white being used to paint it.

This is an example of an analogous color scheme, which utilizes colors positioned close to each other on the color wheel (in this case, greens and blues). It is a calm and low-contrast color scheme favored by the Impressionists.

Sisley also made clever use of outlining to give form to some of the main trees which line the stream.



*Alfred Sisley, Rest Along the Stream, 1878*

In the next page are two winter paintings by Sisley. His restrained use of color was perfect for depicting these snowy landscapes.





*Alfred Sisley, Snow in Vienna-Nadon, 1880*



*Alfred Sisley, First Snow in Vienna-Nadon, 1878*



# Alfred Sisley Quotes

On depicting emotions:

*“Though the artist must remain master of his craft, the surface, at times raised to the highest pitch of loveliness, should transmit to the beholder the sensation which possessed the artist.”*

On creating movement:

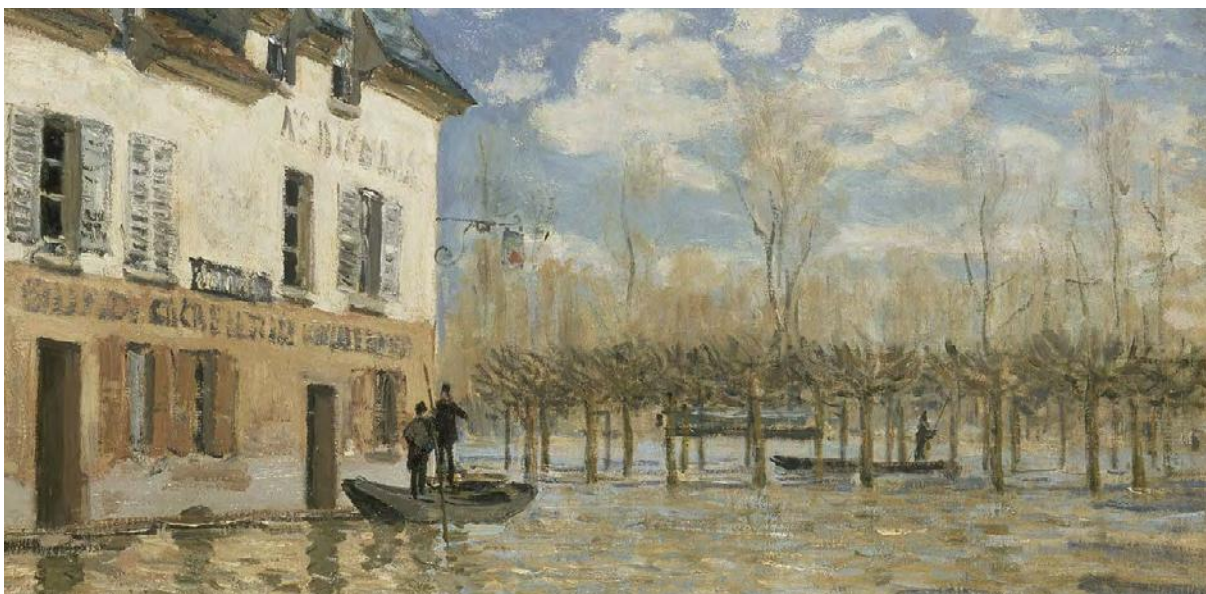
*“The animation of the canvas is one of the hardest problems of painting.”*

On nature:

*“I like all those painters who loved and had a strong feeling for nature.”*

On process:

*“I always start a painting with the sky.”*



Alfred Sisley, *Flood at Port-Marly*, 1876

