Alfred Sisley, *The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow*, ca. 1879

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Alfred Sisley, English, born Paris, 1839–1899</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td><em>The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object Date</td>
<td>ca. 1879</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alternate and Variant Titles</td>
<td><em>The Seine at Billancourt, Snow, La berge à Bellancourt</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dimensions</td>
<td>18 1/8 x 21 15/16 in. (46 x 55.7 cm)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Signed lower left: Sisley.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Credit Line</td>
<td>The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Bequest from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. W. J. Brace, 75-6</td>
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</tbody>
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Catalogue Entry

**Citation**

**Chicago:**

**MLA:**

Alfred Sisley painted *The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow* during a stretch of extreme economic hardship. The artist struggled to support his family throughout his career, but his period of residence in Sèvres (1877–1880), a suburb of Paris, was particularly difficult. Paul Durand-Ruel, Sisley’s dealer and principal source of income, was also in dire straits during the late 1870s, and he stopped purchasing pictures from Sisley between 1876 and 1879. It was only in 1880, when banker Jules Feder provided Durand-Ruel with much-needed capital, that he began acquiring Sisley’s works again.¹ Sisley’s grim financial prospects at this time find their visual corollary in this landscape, an austere winter scene with a muted palette of grays and browns. The composition is divided into two bands of roughly equal size: an overcast sky dominates the upper register, while days-old snow and opaque water fill the bottom one. Apart from Sisley, only a few brave souls have ventured outdoors. The men huddled at the water’s edge draw our eye thanks to the jagged diagonal extending from the bottom right corner to the horizon. Their raised arms suggest that they are signaling the boats offshore. Like Sisley, these figures keep working under harsh conditions.
Commune officially adopted the name “Boulogne-Billancourt.” A bulletin announcing this name change is preserved in the municipal archives (Fig. 1).

Fig. 2. Map of Boulogne-Billancourt, France

Sisley visited Boulogne-Billancourt repeatedly between 1877 and 1879, often painting along the Point du Jour Quay, across from Saint-Germain Island, or the Sèvres Bridge, near Seguin Island (Fig. 2, nos. 1–4). For the Nelson-Atkins landscape, however, Sisley chose a spot further north. His vantage point was almost certainly the Boulogne Quay, today known as the Alphonse Le Gallo Quay (Fig. 2, no. 5). He stationed his easel by Legrand Street (since renamed Gallieni Street), facing south so that his view encompassed Saint-Cloud Park, Monsieur Island, and the hills of Sèvres and Meudon (Fig. 2, nos. 6–8). In the painting, the wooded area at right corresponds to the park and island, while the white slopes beyond are the hills. The snow-covered trapezoid in the foreground is the Boulogne Quay; its lone building, which no longer exists, was probably a private residence.

Completed around 1879, this painting is one of approximately twenty by Sisley depicting the riverfront commune of Boulogne-Billancourt on the western outskirts of Paris. This district’s hyphenated name reflects its history: on January 1, 1860, Billancourt was detached from the commune of Auteuil and annexed to Boulogne-sur-Seine as part of Baron Haussmann’s efforts to expand the limits of Paris. This administrative merger was far from amicable. Boulogne-sur-Seine’s populace was largely aristocratic, while Billancourt’s residents were mostly poor, and neither community desired to join the other. Inhabitants of Billancourt circulated a petition in February 1859 protesting the impending union and calling, unsuccessfully, for their own independent commune. Desire for autonomy remained strong over the next several decades, and in March 1895 a request to separate Billancourt from Boulogne-sur-Seine garnered 1,500 signatures. It was not until 1926—sixty-six years after the merger—that the commune officially adopted the name “Boulogne-Billancourt.” A bulletin announcing this name change is preserved in the municipal archives (Fig. 1).

Fig. 3. Berthaud Frères, Boulogne-sur-Seine—The Seine between Saint-Cloud and Boulogne, ca. 1908, postcard, 5 1/2 x 3 9/16 in. (14 x 9 cm), Archives municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt
Although today the quay is heavily developed, in Sisley’s day it was much less so. An early twentieth-century postcard of this vicinity by Berthaud Frères, which faces the opposite direction, shows a tugboat towing several barges along the Seine between Saint-Cloud Park, on the left, and the Boulogne Quay, on the right (Fig. 3). Apart from the commercial vessels, there are few signs of industry; barely a dwelling is visible along the tree-lined shores.

Fig. 4. Alfred Sisley, *Banks of the Seine in Winter*, ca. 1879, oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 21 5/8 in. (46 x 55 cm), private collection. Courtesy of Simon C. Dickinson Ltd

The view downriver from the Boulogne Quay may have inspired one other wintertime painting by Sisley. A landscape titled *Bords de la Seine en hiver* (*Banks of the Seine in Winter*) in the catalogues raisonnés of Sisley’s oeuvre strongly resembles the Nelson-Atkins scene both in composition and subject (Fig. 4). Long in private hands, this picture recently resurfaced with art dealer Simon C. Dickinson in London, allowing it to be photographed in color for the first time. Like its Kansas City counterpart, the painting depicts a slice of shorefront at left, the gently flowing river at right, and a sunless sky above. Patches of grass poking through the snow in the foreground denote a thaw, suggesting that Sisley returned to the Boulogne Quay a few days after painting the Nelson-Atkins picture to capture the same panorama anew. Small variances in scenery, such as the pitched-roof building and an additional cluster of trees, indicate that Sisley selected a slightly different spot along the quay for his second attempt, but the visual affinity between the snowscapes is nevertheless striking.

Both paintings caught the eye of Durand-Ruel, who acquired them within two years of one another—the Kansas City work in 1892 from French dealer Gaston-Alexandre Camenort (1862-1919) and the privately owned canvas in 1894 from the posthumous sale of French businessman Léon Clapisson. The former remained in Durand-Ruel’s possession for thirty-five years, initially at the firm’s Paris gallery (from 1892 to 1897) but later transferred to its New York branch (from 1897 to 1927). During this lengthy period of ownership, Durand-Ruel Galleries lent the picture to its competitor, Galerie Georges Petit, for an 1897 retrospective on Sisley and also mounted in-house exhibitions on the artist in 1917 and 1921, both of which included the Nelson-Atkins work. These shows were well received. Several critics admired Sisley’s four-season approach; that is, his tendency to represent the same landscapes at different times of year. A visitor to the 1897 retrospective remarked: “I cannot express how much I love this sensitive and modest Sisley, among all the Impressionists, who is exhibiting some of his work at Petit’s... In his paintings, he wishes only to bring to life the serene splendor of summer skies, the poignant melancholy of autumn skies, the innocent sweetness of spring skies, [and] the dreary sadness of winter skies.”

Twenty years later, when *The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow* was on display in New York, an American critic offered similar words of praise and singled out the Kansas City painting as emblematic of this trend:

[Sisley] loved best to picture with his facile brush, the smoothly flowing pellucid Seine and Loing, and the quiet little villages which nestle under their low banks—and to picture them at all seasons, in drowsy summer noontides, on spring mornings, in Indian summer, and again on still wintry days. Here, for example, is the bank at Billancourt on a late spring day, with its luscious greens, and the same scene on a calm winter morning, with soft snow over all.

Both writers lauded Sisley as an astute observer of natural phenomena who excelled at painting the French countryside, no matter the season.

These exhibitions did not immediately yield a sale of *The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow*, but in 1927 Durand-Ruel at last found a buyer: Kansas City dealer Effie Seachrest (1869-1952). The daughter of a cattle farmer, Seachrest was an unlikely advocate for modern art. She studied for two years at the University of Chicago,
intending to become a writer, and then continued her
education at the Stacy Art School (today the Kansas City
Art Institute). Unmarried, she supported herself by
teaching third grade at a local elementary school but
eventually resigned to pursue her true passion. By
traveling regularly to New York and Europe, often
accompanied by other Kansas City women, Seachrest
slowly grew her network and began buying art,
sometimes on consignment, which she sold out of her
home, dubbed the Little Gallery in the Woods. Her 1927
purchase of The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow was
significant: it was quite possibly the first painting by
Sisley to enter a Kansas City collection. The Nelson-
Atkins would not acquire anything by the artist until
1931, when agent Harold Woodbury Parsons facilitated
the museum’s purchase of a Giverny scene by him. Seachrest’s strategy for placing artworks with local
collectors was twofold: she hosted regular classes in art
appreciation for women, and she presented her latest
finds in her gallery. In February 1929, for example,
Seachrest exhibited “canvases by Sisley, Utrillo, Moret,
Maufrau [sic], and Mary Cassatt.” Kansas City Star critic
Minna K. Powell was among those who flocked to
Seachrest’s house, saying: “Impressive names and
imposing prices thrill visitors to the Little Gallery in the
Woods, where Miss Effie Seachrest has on display a
number of French importations.” In all likelihood, this
display included the Nelson-Atkins picture.

One of the women who attended Seachrest’s lectures
was Kansas City resident Mildred Brace (née White,
1882–1975). Seachrest’s classes grew rapidly in size and
popularity, so Brace and other women took turns
providing luncheons for the attendees. As Brace’s
exposure to modern art increased, she and her husband,
William James Brace (1875–1960), began building a
collection. Their home at The Walnuts, a luxury high-rise,
was soon decorated with paintings, prints, and
sculptures by Albert André (1869–1954), Émile-Antoine
Bourdelle (1861–1929), Mary Cassatt (1844–1926),
Frederick Carl Frieseke (1874–1939), Childe Hassam
(1859–1935), Robert Henri (1865–1929), Camille Pissarro
(1831–1903), and Sisley. They purchased The Embankment
at Billancourt—Snow from Seachrest at an unknown date,
most likely in the late 1920s or 1930s. A black-and-
white photograph of the couple’s living room shows
William James Brace playing a Hammond B3 electric
organ with Sisley’s landscape and Hassam’s
Marlborough Street, Boston (ca. 1889) hanging directly
above him (Fig. 5). William James was passionate about
organ music, so the paintings installed above his beloved
instrument must have occupied a place of honor within
the home. Both pictures remained in the Brace family
until Mildred’s death in 1975, when the Nelson-Atkins
received them as a bequest.

Painted during a period of adversity for Sisley, The
Embankment at Billancourt—Snow bears witness not only
to the artist’s struggles but also to historical tensions
between residents of Boulogne-sur-Seine and
Billancourt. Its early arrival in Kansas City, six years
before the Nelson-Atkins opened its doors in 1933,
helped introduce modernism to the Midwest. Today it is
one of three important landscapes by Sisley in the
museum’s collection.

Brigid M. Boyle
July 2022

Notes

1. Caroline Durand-Ruel Godefroy, “Paul Durand-
Ruel and Alfred Sisley: 1872–1895,” in MaryAnne
Stevens, ed., Alfred Sisley, exh. cat. (London: Royal
Academy of Arts, 1992), 36–38.

2. The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow is signed but
undated. When the painting was first displayed at
the Exposition Alfred Sisley, Galerie Georges Petit,
Paris, February 5–28, 1897, it appeared as La Berge,
a Billancourt, neige, 1879 in the exhibition
catalogue. The same date is given for the picture
in both catalogues raisonnés of Sisley’s work. See
François Daute, Alfred Sisley: Catalogue raisonné de
l’œuvre peint (Lausanne: Éditions Durand-Ruel,
1959, no. 347, unpaginated; and Sylvie Brame and François Lorencceau, Alfred Sisley: Catalogue critique des peintures et des pastels (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des arts, 2021), no. 376, p. 164. A Durand-Ruel label on the painting’s stretcher bears an alternative date of 1873, but the latter is almost certainly erroneous. Sisley is not known to have painted at Boulogne-Billancourt prior to 1877; see MaryAnne Stevens, independent scholar, to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, April 21, 2022, NAMA curatorial files. According to Flavie Durand-Ruel, incorrect dates of creation for artworks are not uncommon in Durand-Ruel’s records; see Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie, to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, April 19, 2022, NAMA curatorial files.

3. For Sisley’s other paintings of Boulogne-Billancourt, see Brame and Lorencceau, Alfred Sisley, nos. 267-76, 303, 305-10, 324, and possibly 380, pp. 127-29, 138-41, 147, and 165. Boulogne-Billancourt belongs to the so-called “belle boucle de la Seine” (beautiful loop of the Seine), an area extending from Issy-les-Moulineaux to Suresnes. It was so named by Albert Bezançon, one of the founders of Société historique de Boulogne-Billancourt. See Les peintres de la “belle boucle” de la Seine, 1800–1930, exh. cat. (Issy-les-Moulineaux, France: Musée Français de la Carte à Jouer de la Ville d’Issy-les-Moulineaux, 2015), 11.


7. Alphonse Le Gallo was a longtime mayor of Boulogne-Billancourt. I am indebted to Claude Colas, chef du service des Archives municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt, and Alexis Monnerot-Dumaine, author of the blog Le Village de Billancourt: Quand Billancourt était au milieu des champs (https://levillagedebillancourt.fr/), for their help in identifying Sisley’s location.

8. It is unknown when this house was constructed or demolished. The town cadastres (property registers) of 1860 and 1905 make no mention of a building at this site. Claude Colas, Archives municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt, to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, July 21, 2022, NAMA curatorial files.

9. Indeed, the Legrand port at the Alphonse Le Gallo quay is currently the focus of a major urban project. HAROPA PORT, the agency that oversees the ports of Le Havre, Rouen, and Paris, is redeveloping this site in 2022-2023. Planned improvements include upgrades to existing port facilities, a new pedestrian side path, and better points of access for vehicles. See “Redevelopment of the Legrand port in Boulogne-Billancourt,” HAROPA PORT, April 5, 2022, https://www.haropaport.com/en/paris/redevelopm legrand-port-boulogne-billancourt-92.

10. See Daulte, Alfred Sisley, no. 348, unpaginated; and Brame and Lorencceau, Alfred Sisley, no. 380, p. 165. Daulte assigned the two paintings sequential numbers (the Nelson-Atkins work is no. 347), presumably in recognition of this resemblance.

11. For a concurring opinion, see Alexis Monnerot-Dumaine, independent scholar, to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, July 19, 2022, NAMA curatorial files. Another possibility is that the privately owned picture depicts Suresnes, a suburb just north of Boulogne-Billancourt on the left bank of the Seine. French businessman Léon Clapissin (1836–1894), the painting’s first known owner, recorded its title as Un dégel (Suresnes) (A Thaw (Suresnes)) and its year of creation as 1880 in his notebook. See Anne Distel, “Appendix II: The Notebooks of Léon Clapissin,” in Colin B. Bailey, Renoir’s Portraits: Impressions of an Age, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 354. Whether this information is reliable is open to debate: at Clapissin’s posthumous sale, the work received a different title, Les Bords du Loing en hiver (The Banks of the Loing in Winter). See Catalogue de Tableaux modernes, Pastels, Aquarelles et Dessins; Tableaux et Dessins anciens; Composant la Collection
De M. X**** (Paris: Hotel Drouot, April 18, 1894), 11. If the picture’s setting is indeed Suresnes, then Sisley surely had the Nelson-Atkins picture in mind when painting it.

12. For Clapisson’s life and career, see Anne Distel, “Léon Clapisson: Patron and Collector,” in Bailey, Renoir’s Portraits, 76–86.


14. Montmirail, “Notes d’un badaud,” Le Gaulois, no. 5588 (February 20, 1897): 1. “Je ne saurais dire combien j’aime entre tous les impressionnistes ce délicat et simple Sisley qui expose chez Petit une partie de son œuvre. . . . il ne souhaite que de faire revivre dans ses tableaux la sereine splendeur des ciels d’été, la mélancholie douloreuse des ciels d’automne, la douceur virginal des ciels de printemps, la morne tristesse des ciels d’hiver.” All translations are by Brigid M. Boyle.


17. Seachrest purchased at least two other paintings by Sisley at unknown dates: The Dam at Saint-Mammés and Vieilles maisons (Old Houses). She lent the latter to the Nelson-Atkins in 1934. I thank MacKenzie Mallon, specialist, provenance, NAMA, for this information.


20. For example, Brace served lunch to Seachrest’s guests on December 1, 1942. See “Society,” Kansas City Times, December 1, 1942, 4.

21. No purchase invoice survives, but James Reuland, grandson of Mildred and William James Brace, believes they acquired The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow from Seachrest “well before 1950 (and I imagine also well before the 1942 event),” by which he means the luncheon Mildred Brace hosted in 1942 (see note 20). James Reuland to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, March 23, 2022, NAMA curatorial files.

22. I thank James and Terrence Reuland for sharing memories of their grandfather’s organ-playing. For more on the Braces, see their obituaries: “W. J. Brace is Dead: Former Gleaner Firm Head was 84,” Kansas City Times, August 30, 1960, 3; and “Mrs. Mildred Brace,” Kansas City Star, March 17, 1975, 5.

Technical Entry

Technical entry forthcoming.

Documentation

Citation

Chicago:
Atkins Museum of Art, 2023), https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.660.4033.

MLA:

Provenance
With Gaston-Alexandre Camenot, Paris, by February 23, 1892;
Purchased from Camenot by Galeries Durand-Ruel, Paris, stock no. 2021, as La berge à Billancourt, 1892–July 1897 [1];
Purchased from Durand-Ruel Galleries by Effie Seachrest, Kansas City, MO, 1927–no later than June 18, 1949 [3];
Purchased from Seachrest by Mr. William James (1875–1960) and Mrs. Mildred (née White, 1882–1975) Brace, Kansas City, MO, by 1949–March 31, 1975 [4];

Notes
[3] See email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie., Paris, to Nicole Myers, NAMA, January 11, 2016, NAMA curatorial files. Effie Seachrest (1869–1952) was a Kansas City dealer and connoisseur of modern art who went on frequent scouting trips to New York and Europe. She organized exhibitions and hosted art appreciation classes at her home on Troostwood Road, known as the Little Gallery in the Woods. Seachrest sold The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow to William James and Mildred Brace sometime prior to June 18, 1949, when the Brace’s had the painting cleaned by Nelson-Atkins conservator James Roth; see Nelson-Atkins deposit receipt dated June 18, 1949, NAMA curatorial files. The precise date of sale is unknown, but extant correspondence confirms that Seachrest placed the painting in the Brace collection; see letter from Ralph T. Coe, NAMA, to Mildred Brace, June 9, 1966, NAMA archives. James Reuland, grandson of William James and Mildred Brace, believes his grandparents acquired The Embankment at Billancourt—Snow "well before" Seachrest’s passing in 1952. See email from James Reuland to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, March 23, 2022, NAMA curatorial files.

Related Works

Exhibitions
Exposition Alfred Sisley, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, February 5–28, 1897, no. 7, as La Berge, à Billancourt, neige, 1879.
Exhibition: Paintings by Sisley (1840–1899), Durand-Ruel Galleries, New York, March 24–April 7, 1917, no. 1, as La berge à Billancourt.
Exhibition of Paintings by Alfred Sisley (1840–1899), Durand-Ruel Galleries, New York, January 8–22, 1921, no. 12, as La berge à Billancourt.
Exhibition of Paintings by Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley, Durand-Ruel Galleries, New York, February 18–March 1925, no. 19, La berge à Billancourt.


Gli Impressionisti e la neve: La Francia e l'Europa, Palazzina della Promotrice delle Belle Arti, Turin, Italy, November 27, 2004–April 25, 2005, no. 125, as L'argine a Billancourt, neve.

References


Exhibition of Paintings by Alfred Sisley (1840–1899), exh. cat. (New York: Durand-Ruel Galleries, 1921), unpaginated, as La berge à Billancourt.


Exhibition of Paintings by Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley, exh. cat. (New York: Durand-Ruel Galleries, 1925), unpaginated, as La berge à Billancourt.


Ralph T. Coe, “Fine Art in Growing Private Collections Here,” Kansas City Times 97, no. 135 (February 11, 1965): 12D.


