

French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor



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Alfred Sisley, *The Lock of Saint-Mammès*, 1885

Artist	Alfred Sisley, English, born Paris, 1839–1899
Title	<i>The Lock of Saint-Mammès</i>
Object Date	1885
Alternate and Variant Titles	<i>L'ecluse de Saint-Mammès; Le Loing à Saint-Mammès</i>
Medium	Oil on canvas
Dimensions (Unframed)	15 x 21 1/2 in. (38.1 x 54.6 cm)
Signature	Signed and dated lower right: Sisley. 85
Credit Line	The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Gift of Henry W. and Marion H. Bloch, 2015.13.24

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Catalogue Entry

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Canal and river locks were a source of perennial fascination for "English Impressionist" Alfred Sisley, so called because of his English heritage.¹ Between the

mid-1870s and early 1890s, he created numerous oil and pastel renderings of locks at Bougival, Moret-sur-Loing, Ouzouer-sur-Trézée, and Saint-Mammès in France, as well as East Molesey in England.² This interest may have stemmed, in part, from Sisley's early exposure to John Constable's (1776–1837) paintings of locks, which he discovered while living in London from 1857 to 1860.³ Some of Sisley's lock pictures offer close-range views of weirs, sluice gates, and towpaths, while others show the locks from afar, largely obscuring their control mechanisms. The Nelson-Atkins landscape is one of the latter. Completed while Sisley was living in the town of Sablons, it depicts the eastern shore of the Canal du Loing in Saint-Mammès, just south of where it empties into the Seine River. During the 1880s, Sisley produced a significant body of work devoted to the Saint-Mammès waterfront, which earned him many accolades. Art critic Gustave Geffroy dubbed Sisley the "charming poet" of Saint-Mammès in an 1883 exhibition review, and symbolist writer Henri de Régnier paid tribute to Sisley's images of the Loing, Marne, and Seine rivers in a 1918 poem.⁴



Fig. 1. J. Féjard (publisher), Coffin (printer), *Saint-Mammès: L'Écluse du Canal du Loing*, ca. 1905, photomechanical print, 3 1/2 x 5 7/16 in. (8.9 x 13.8 cm), collection of the author

The Canal du Loing was the brainchild of Philippe II, duc d'Orléans (1674–1723), who was then regent of France. Seeking to improve the navigability of the Loing, he proposed to connect the Briare Canal in Buges, France, to the Seine at Saint-Mammès, a distance of more than thirty miles. Louis XV approved the project in 1719, and the canal officially opened in 1724.⁵ The original Saint-Mammès lock was in service for more than a century before being rebuilt in 1844.⁶ In Sisley's time, it was one of twenty locks along the canal, nineteen of which are still used today.⁷ Nearly two thousand barges passed through the Saint-Mammès lock each month by 1890, loaded with coal, lime, cobblestones, fertilizer, and other goods.⁸ Their comings and goings were overseen by the lockkeeper. Little is known of the person who held that position during Sisley's period of activity in Saint-Mammès, but from 1895 to 1929 it was held by Monsieur Péan, a former deep-sea diver whose swimming skills secured him the lockkeeper job after his predecessor drowned.⁹ In a newspaper profile published a few weeks before Péan's retirement, he describes working fifteen-hour days, struggling to operate the sluice gates when water levels rose, and striving to prevent logjams.¹⁰ A picture postcard mailed in 1905 shows a boat preparing to enter the Saint-Mammès lock, Péan having already opened the gates to allow its passage (Fig. 1).



Fig. 2. Alfred Sisley, *The Saint-Mammès Lock* (Department Seine-et-Marne, France) [*L'Écluse de Saint-Mammès (Département de Seine-et-Marne, France)*], ca. 1885, black chalk on paper, 5 1/16 x 8 1/4 in. (12.9 x 21.0 cm), Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Loan: Stichting Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen 1940 (former collection Koenigs). Photographer: Studio Tromp



Fig. 3. Alfred Sisley, *Barges*, 1885, oil on canvas, 21 9/16 x 15 3/16 in. (54.7 x 38.5 cm), private collection. Photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images

In the Kansas City painting, the top of those gates is just barely visible at center left, below the house with dormer windows. As was his usual practice, Sisley undertook no preparatory studies for this work, but he did record the

composition after the fact in a now-unbound *livre de raison* (Fig. 2).¹¹ He also produced a second painting of the same scene, identical in size but vertical in format (Fig. 3). It replicates the left half of the Nelson-Atkins work, with only minor changes in the spacing of boats, placement of figures, and distribution of clouds. In both pictures, several watercraft occupy the foreground, one laden with a lifting jack probably destined for a nearby boatyard.¹² The early 1880s saw a flurry of naval construction in response to Opportunist legislation seeking to reinvest in France's canal network and standardize the size of lock chambers and barges.¹³ Sisley had witnessed hydraulic equipment being transported by water at least twice before, once near Bougival and once somewhere on the Loing.¹⁴ The latter encounter inspired a small, rapidly executed oil sketch, today in private hands (Fig. 4). Here, the jack is the dominant motif, towering above both the surrounding greenery and the lone spectator watching from the shore, whereas in *The Lock of Saint-Mammès* the jack shares the picture space with other formal elements.



Fig. 4. Alfred Sisley, *Cargo Ship on the Loing*, ca. 1880, oil on panel, 4 3/4 x 5 3/4 in. (12.1 x 14.6 cm), private collection. Photograph courtesy of Sotheby's, Inc. © 2005

Chief among those elements are the three buildings in the background. At the far left of the Nelson-Atkins picture is the diminutive *guérite*, a brick hut where the lockkeeper watched for inbound traffic. The original hut, visible in the abovementioned postcard, is no longer extant, but a reconstruction stands in its place.¹⁵ Directly behind this lookout post is the slate-roofed lockkeeper's house, which was completed by 1779 and survives to this

day.¹⁶ It was there that Péan lived during his thirty-four-year tenure, as did his predecessor. Finally, silhouetted against the blue sky is another, larger residence with multiple chimneys and a mansard roof. In Sisley's lifetime, it housed the receiver and the controller, the public officials responsible for collecting tonnage duties and checking cargo.¹⁷ Sisley painted this building cluster repeatedly during the 1880s, sometimes making it the focal point of his composition and sometimes portraying it obliquely from a great distance.¹⁸

Over time, the larger house ceased to serve as a dwelling, and in 1936 the National Office of Shipping opened a *bourse d'affrètement* (freight exchange office) on its ground floor as part of a nationwide effort to better regulate river transport. Previously, local bargeman had been forced to negotiate deals through brokers, in meetings that often took place at bars and involved bribes, but now they could accept loads for transport at this government bureau.¹⁹ The bourse remained a hub of economic activity until December 31, 1999, when France did away with the then-outdated system and closed all remaining exchange offices.²⁰ On the wall outside the now-vacant building—the same wall that divides *The Lock of Saint-Mammès* into two horizontal registers—a mural painting by the Lyonnais cooperative CitéCréation commemorates the bourse (Fig. 5).²¹ Crafted using the technique of marouflage, it shows more than a dozen bargeman inside the exchange office crowded around a chart that lists the merchandise available for transport, along with their respective tonnage, docking dates, and destinations.



Fig. 5. CitéCréation, *Canal Trades*, 2006, mural painting on canvas with marouflage, quai du Loing, Saint-Mammès. Photograph courtesy of Bérengère Biard

Flanking the future bourse in the Nelson-Atkins painting are verdant trees, some several stories tall and others much smaller in stature. They are vestiges of an eighteenth-century *pépinière* (nursery) whose purpose was to cultivate saplings for transplantation along the canal, where they would both stabilize and beautify the banks. Begun in 1735 and expanded in 1746 and 1752, the nursery comprised more than fourteen thousand trees by 1784, spread across nine different patches.²² A variety of species grew there, including sugar maples, lime trees, elms, white mulberries, plane trees, poplars, white oaks, yews, hackberries, and Judas trees.²³ In *The Lock of Saint-Mammès*, Sisley was not interested in distinguishing these sundry types. Rather, he included the trees to help balance the composition, provide a sense of scale, and heighten the scene's picturesque appeal. Having lived in the countryside for most of his life, Sisley was adept at capturing its unique charms.

In recent times, the lock of Saint-Mammès and its facing property have made headlines. The erstwhile bourse is today owned by the Voies navigables de France (Waterways of France, or VNF), the government agency charged with managing France's inland waterways network and its associated facilities. Since 2020, the VNF has sought to sell the unused building. Many community stakeholders are keen to purchase the building for the municipality of Saint-Mammès, to petition the Ministry of Culture to classify it as a historical monument, and to turn it into a shipping museum, library, or other cultural space.²⁴ Joël Surier, mayor of Saint-Mammès, compiled a dossier to this effect with the help of two local groups, the Association Fluviale entre Seine et Loing (Seine and Loing River Association) and the Collectif 1000 Sabords (1000 Portholes Collective).²⁵ However, efforts stalled in September 2021, much to the dismay of those partner organizations. As recently as April 3, 2022, residents of Saint-Mammès staged a protest outside the padlocked bourse, demanding that the mayor establish a commission to see the project through.²⁶ It is this author's hope that their plans are realized. The building and its environs are important not only for the history of Saint-Mammès, but also as a memorial to the town's most celebrated painter, who recorded its canal lock again and again and made a lasting imprint on this quiet village.

Brigid M. Boyle
June 2022

Notes

1. Though the artist was born in Paris, his parents, William (1799–1879) and Felicia (née Sell, 1808–1866) Sisley, hailed from the United Kingdom. This ancestry earned him the moniker made famous by Vivienne Couldrey's monograph, *Alfred Sisley: The English Impressionist* (Newton Abbot, UK: David and Charles, 1992).
2. See, for example, Sylvie Brame and François Lorenceau, *Alfred Sisley: Catalogue critique des peintures et des pastels* (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des arts, 2021), cats. 68, 151, 153, 492, 493, 657, 658, 800, 917, and P46, pp. 62, 89–90, 201, 252, 300, 341, and 395.
3. On Sisley's debt to Constable, see MaryAnne Stevens, "Un peintre entre deux traditions," in *Alfred Sisley: Poète de l'impressionnisme*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2002), 53. As Stevens notes, one painting that Sisley had opportunity to see was Constable's *A Boat Passing a Lock*, 1826, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in. (101.6 x 127.0 cm), Royal Academy of Arts, London, 03/923.
4. For Geffroy's description of "le paisible Saint-Mammès dont Sisley est le poète charmant" (the peaceful Saint-Mammès of which Sisley is the charming poet), see Gustave Geffroy, "Chronique: A. Sisley," *La Justice*, June 23, 1883, 1. For the poem, see Henri de Régnier, "Médaillons de peintres," *Revue des Deux Mondes* 48, no. 3 (December 1, 1918): 619.
5. Hélène Fatoux, *Histoire d'Eau en Seine-et-Marne* (Le Mée-sur-Seine, France: Editions Amattéis, 1987), 1:49.
6. See Mairie de Saint-Mammès, "La Bourse d'Affrètement de Saint-Mammès: L'entretien et la modernisation des ouvrages," accessed May 9, 2022, <https://mairiesaintmammes.fr/bourse-ouvrages>. I thank Bérengère Biard, Association Fluviale entre Seine et Loing, for referring me to this site.
7. E. Lèbe-Gigun, "Canal du Loing," *Rapports du préfet: Conseil général du Loiret* (August 1890): 70. Due to changes in the Seine's water levels, the Saint-Mammès lock is no longer active.
8. For a list of principal merchandise by tonnage, see Lèbe-Gigun, "Canal du Loing," 73.

9. The drowned man likely served as lockkeeper when Sisley painted the Nelson-Atkins work. Given the artist's frequent visits to Saint-Mammès during the 1880s, it is possible that the two men were acquainted.
10. Germaine Decaris, "À la croisée des fleuves: L'écluse de Saint-Mammès," *Le Soir*, September 8, 1929, 1, 3. Péan's successor faced a steep learning curve. Barely five weeks after Péan resigned his post, a horse-drawn boat refused to cede the right of way to a steam-powered one at the Saint-Mammès lock, blocking traffic and necessitating police intervention. This incident was widely covered in the French press. See "Deux bateliers entêtés obstruent le canal du Loing à l'écluse de Saint-Mammès," *Le Petit parisien*, November 8, 1929, 3; and Lucien Louage, "On ne passe pas!: La navigation est interrompue à l'écluse Saint-Mammès," *L'Informateur de Fontainebleau*, November 8, 1929, 1.
11. Sisley's best-known livre de raison belongs to the Musée du Louvre (RF 11596) and contains sixty sketches of completed paintings; see Georges Wildenstein, "Un carnet de dessins de Sisley au musée du Louvre," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 53, no. 1080 (January 1959): 57–60. The current drawing comes from a slightly larger livre de raison. See H[endrik] R[ichard] Hoetink, *Fransé tekeningen uit de 19e eeuw: Catalogus van de verzameling in het Museum Boymans-van Beuningen* (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1968), 144.
12. Bérengère Biard, Association Fluviale entre Seine et Loing, to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, April 7, 2022, NAMA curatorial files.
13. For a discussion of this legislation and its ramifications, see Anne L. Cowe, "Sisley and the Seine: A River of Change," in Marina Ferretti Bocquillon, *Impressionism on the Seine*, exh. cat. (Giverny: Musée des impressionnismes, 2010), 29–41.
14. See Brame and Lorenceau, *Alfred Sisley: Catalogue critique des peintures et des pastels*, cats. 115 and 427, pp. 76 and 180. Both paintings are in private collections. The former was sold at *Impressionist and Modern Art*, Bonham's, London, February 4, 2016, lot 10; the latter at *Impressionist and Modern Art: Part Two*, Sotheby's, New York, November 3, 2005, lot 117.
15. "Make A Stop at the Village of the Bargemen," Office de Tourisme Moret Seine et Loing, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://www.msl-tourisme.fr/en/discover-moret-seine-loing/history-heritage/msl-distillation-french-history/the-village-of-the-bargemen.html>.
16. It is unclear precisely when construction began on the lockkeeper's house, but it was likely after 1755, since the building is absent from a 1755 map of the property. Biard to Boyle, April 6, 2022, NAMA curatorial files. See also Mairie de Saint-Mammès, "La Bourse d'Affrètement de Saint-Mammès: Origines et histoires," accessed May 9, 2022, <https://mairiesaintmammes.fr/bourse-origines/>.
17. Biard to Boyle, April 6 and 7, 2022.
18. For contrasting examples, see Brame and Lorenceau, *Alfred Sisley: Catalogue critique des peintures et des pastels*, cats. 666 and 800, pp. 255 and 300.
19. See Mairie de Saint-Mammès, "La Bourse d'Affrètement."
20. Dominique Malécot, "La libéralisation du transport fluvial entre dans les faits le 1er janvier," *Les Échos*, December 24, 1999, <https://www.lesechos.fr/1999/12/la-liberalisation-du-transport-fluvial-entre-dans-les-faits-le-1er-janvier-783331>. France was the last member of the European Union to implement this change. Since 2000, French bargemen have offered their services directly to shippers.
21. For more on CitéCréation, see their website at <https://citecreation.fr>.
22. Ministère de la Culture, "Site d'écluse dit écluse 20 de Saint-Mammès," *POP: La plateforme ouverte du patrimoine*, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://www.pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/merimee/IA>
23. See Mairie de Saint-Mammès, "La Bourse d'Affrètement."
24. Geoffrey Faucheux, "Seine-et-Marne: La bourse d'affrètement de Saint-Mammès bientôt classée aux monuments historiques?," *actu.fr*, December 8, 2020, https://actu.fr/ile-de-france/saint-mammes_77419/seine-et-marne-la-bourse-d-affretement-de-saint-mammes-bientot-classee-aux-monuments-historiques_37974135.html.

25. Biard to Boyle, April 1, 2022.

26. See "Quel avenir pour la bourse," *Saint-Mammès en transition: Collectif 1000 Sabords*, April 19, 2022, <https://collectif1000sabords.wordpress.com/2022/04/19/quel-avenir-pour-la-bourse>.

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Provenance

Purchased from the artist by Galeries Durand-Ruel, Paris, stock no. 774, as *L'Écluse de St. Mammès*, December 22, 1885–August 1888 [1];

Transferred from Galeries Durand-Ruel, Paris, to Durand-Ruel Galleries, New York, August 1888 [2];

Erwin Davis (1831–1903), New York, by April 14, 1899;

Purchased from Davis by Durand-Ruel Galleries, New York, stock no. 2232, as *L'Écluse de Saint-Mammès*, 1899–February 1, 1943 [3];

Purchased from Durand-Ruel Galleries by Sam Salz Inc., New York, stock no. 596, as *L'Écluse de St Mammé*, February 1–March 22, 1943 [4];

Purchased from Salz by Mr. George S. Gregory (né Grisha Josefowitz, 1895–1983) and Mrs. Elizabeth "Lydia" Gregory (née Sliosberg, 1905–1978), New York, 1943–March 5, 1983 [5];

By descent to their son, Alexis Gregory (1936–2020), New York, 1983–September 30, 1994;

Purchased from Gregory by Richard L. Feigen and Co., New York, stock no. 19627-D, as *Le Loing à Saint-Mammès (The River Loing at Saint-Mammès)*, September 30–November 8, 1994 [6];

Purchased from Feigen by Marion (née Helzberg, 1931–2013) and Henry (1922–2019) Bloch, Shawnee Mission, KS, 1994–June 15, 2015;

Their gift to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 2015.

Notes

[1] See emails from Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie., Paris, to Brigid M. Boyle, the Nelson-Atkins, April 6 and 19, 2022, NAMA curatorial files. A consular invoice on the painting's stretcher indicates that *The Lock of Saint-Mammès* was shipped from Paris to New York on April 11, 1888. Durand-Ruel officially transferred ownership of the painting to its New York branch in August 1888.

[2] Durand-Ruel's stock books do not record when or to whom stock no. 774 was sold. See email from Paul-Louis and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie., Paris, to Nicole Myers, the Nelson-Atkins, January 11, 2016, NAMA curatorial files.

[3] For the purchase date, sale date, and stock number, see email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie., Paris, to Nicole Myers, the Nelson-Atkins, January 11, 2016, NAMA curatorial files. The stock number is corroborated by a Durand-Ruel paper label on the stretcher and a Durand-Ruel photo stock card, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Photo Archives, no. A177.

[4] Durand-Ruel recorded the purchase date as February 1, 1943, while Sam Salz recorded it as February 2, 1943; we have adopted the former. Salz recorded the sale date as March 22, 1943. See email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie., Paris, to Nicole Myers, the Nelson-Atkins, January 11, 2016, NAMA curatorial files; and Inventory Book, 1940–1944, pages 38 and 123, Sam Salz Archive, Department of Image Collections, National Gallery of Art Library,

Washington, DC, Gift of Marc Salz in memory of his father Sam Salz.

[5] When George S. Gregory passed away on March 5, 1983, his son Alexis Gregory inherited *The Lock of Saint-Mammès*. Verbal communication from Peter Gregory, younger brother of Alexis Gregory, to Brigid M. Boyle, the Nelson-Atkins, March 21, 2022; see notes in NAMA curatorial files.

[6] For the purchase date of September 30, 1994, see email from Cynthia Conti, Richard L. Feigen and Co., to Brigid M. Boyle, the Nelson-Atkins, March 18, 2022, NAMA curatorial files. For the sale date of November 8, 1994, see Richard L. Feigen and Co. invoice, NAMA curatorial files. For the stock number, see paper label from Richard L. Feigen and Co. on the painting's backing board.

Related Works

Alfred Sisley, *Boats on the Canal du Loing, Saint-Mammès*, ca. 1885, 21 9/16 x 15 3/16 in. (54.7 x 38.5 cm), private collection, cited in Sylvie Brame and François Lorenceau, *Alfred Sisley: Catalogue critique des peintures et des pastels* (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des arts, 2021), no. 657, p. 252.

Alfred Sisley, *The Saint-Mammès Lock (Department Seine-et-Marne, France)*, ca. 1885, black chalk, 5 1/16 x 8 1/4 in. (12.9 x 21 cm), Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, no. F II 144 (PK).

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Manet to Matisse: Impressionist Masters from the Marion and Henry Bloch Collection, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, June 9–September 9, 2007, no. 11, as *The Lock of Saint-Mammès (L'écluse de Saint-Mammès)*.

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H[endrik] R[ichard] Hoetink, *Franse tekeningen uit de 19e eeuw: Catalogus van de verzameling in het Museum Boymans-van Beuningen* (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1968), 144.

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Alfred Sisley: poète de l'impressionnisme, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2002), 89, 354, 357n16.

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Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro, *Manet to Matisse: Impressionist Masters from the Marion and Henry Bloch Collection*, exh. cat. (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007), 14, 70–73, 158, (repro.), as *The Lock of Saint-Mammès (L'écluse de Saint-Mammès)*.

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