

**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

VOLUME TWO

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,
Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House,
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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305 | Apples and Grapes in a Basket c. 1880–81

Oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm

Lower right: Sisley.

1955.543

Alfred Sisley devoted himself more exclusively to the rural landscape than any other leading Impressionist. Portraits, nudes, domestic scenes, and urban views featured either minimally or not at all in his oeuvre, which was the outcome of unusually consistent ambitions and working practices. Any exception to this rule naturally attracts our attention. The main departure in Sisley's case was a scattering of nine still lifes, most of them made at uncertain dates and in circumstances that remain unclear.¹ Were they self-imposed exercises in form and space? Did the perennially impoverished artist hope that these pictures would attract new customers? Do they represent a competitive engagement with his more versatile contemporaries? Or was the weather a dominant factor, keeping Sisley indoors and obliging him to improvise?

Despite Sisley's inexperience in the genre, and contrary to his reputation for pictorial restraint, *Apples and Grapes in a Basket* is a remarkably forceful example of still-life painting. Centrally placed in a bold, pyramidal composition, the basket of fruit establishes a note of density that pervades the work, its rounded forms and palpable textures seeming to defy the flatness of the canvas. The rich reds of the apples and the cool, metallic grays of the tablecloth intensify these oppositions, while the mid-tones and delicate handling of the grapes add a touch of lusciousness. The play of light is also emphatic: deep shadows among the fruit and within the wickerwork are echoed in the background wall, and in diagonal streaks that Sisley contrives to cast in both directions—echoed in the oblique accent of the knife—across the table. This dramatic tonality and an almost grid-like rigor in the foreground are also present in a companion work, *Grapes and Walnuts on a Table* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), based on a similar setting and presumably executed about the same time.² Unique to the Clark picture, however, are the two satellite fruits at bottom left which are cut sharply by the frame, inflecting

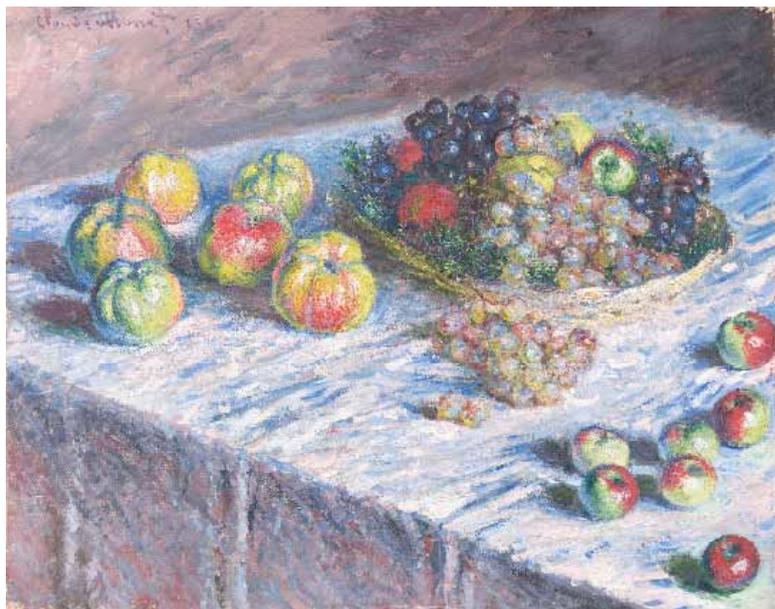


Fig. 305.1 Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926), *Apples and Grapes*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 66.2 x 82.3 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection (1933.1152)

the overall symmetry and heightening the dialogue between two- and three-dimensions throughout this canvas. Comparison with the simpler Boston study also draws attention to the ghostly curtain or drape at upper right in *Apples and Grapes in a Basket*, which seems to lack the conviction of the rest of the scene. The site of some early damage—perhaps in Sisley's lifetime—this insertion may represent an attempt by the artist to cover the repaired area or simply to fill a perceived void in the picture's severe design.³

The tradition of the European still life is vividly evident in *Apples and Grapes in a Basket*, from echoes of the sumptuously spread tables of the Dutch seventeenth century to the angled knives and poised, solitary fruits of Jean-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779). Though the elements of Sisley's picture are modestly domestic—it was executed at a time when he was deep in debt—we sense a determination to celebrate the visual and sensual pleasures available to him.⁴ Comparisons have been made with paintings of similar items by both Édouard Manet and Claude Monet, notably the latter's *Apples and Grapes* (fig. 305.1).⁵ Dated 1880 and probably shown in Paris in that year, Monet's canvas is larger than Sisley's and presents a more complex arrangement of fruit on a diagonally tilted surface, but is otherwise very close in character to *Apples and Grapes in a Basket*. Because the Clark work has long been assigned to 1876, however, it was implicitly placed before the picture by Monet, though there is now reason to question this priority.⁶ Between 1879 and 1880, Monet produced more than a dozen varied and assertive still lifes, exhibiting and selling most of them immediately.⁷ Given Monet's known

inventiveness and evident success, it seems altogether more likely that Sisley responded to his lead by painting *Apples and Grapes in a Basket* soon after the Paris exhibition of 1880.⁸

The role of Paul Cézanne has also been underestimated in the evolution of *Apples and Grapes in a Basket*. Though there were no strong personal ties between the two artists, Sisley and Cézanne were in occasional contact during the 1860s and 1870s, and showed together at the 1874 and 1877 Impressionist exhibitions.⁹ In 1877, Cézanne had included three characteristic tabletop still lifes among his submissions: one built around a pyramid of white linen and a central plate of apples; another featuring a prominently tilted knife; and a third with an extreme range of values.¹⁰ Contact with such canvases may well account for the compositional drama and emphatic facture of *Apples and Grapes in a Basket*, which have few equivalents in Sisley's output.¹¹ The deliberation with which Sisley responded to prototypes by Monet, Cézanne, and others is apparent throughout this painting, not least in the traces of careful drawing—just visible to the naked eye, but clear under infrared light—within the bunch of grapes.¹² Staking out a middle ground between his colleagues, Sisley constructed a persuasive account of his meager life, while hinting at skills that remained largely dormant. RK

PROVENANCE Mrs. Allan Hay, New York (until 1899, sold to Durand-Ruel, 2 Mar. 1899); [Durand-Ruel, Paris, sold to Mancini, 13 Nov. 1899]; Mancini, Paris (from 1899); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 28 Mar. 1951, as *Still Life*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1951–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, no. 124, pl. 41; New York 1966b, no. 29, ill., as *Nature Morte: Pommes et Raisins*; New York 1967, no. 50; London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, pp. 86, 96, 174–75, no. 43, ill., as *Still Life: Apples and Grapes*; Washington–Boston 2001–2, pp. 106–8, 218, pl. 39, as *Still Life: Apples and Grapes*; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, pp. 104–5, fig. 96.

REFERENCES Daulte 1959, no. 234, ill., as *Nature morte: pommes et raisins*; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 142, ill.; Daulte 1972b, p. 38, ill.; Gache-Patin and Lassaigue 1983, p. 59, fig. 73; Cogniat 1992, pp. 61, 65, ill.; Gache-Patin 1992, p. 6, fig. 4; Esielonis 1994, p. 92; Madrid 2010–11, p. 35, fig. 18.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a fine-weight linen (31 threads/cm) that had been glue-lined on a coarse-weave linen. In 1992, the early lining was replaced due to a large

old tear which was pulling forward. This multi-armed tear in the upper right quadrant is 28.6 cm high by 19.1 cm wide, and runs through the gray drapery down into the table cover and over to the edges of the grapes. Losses scattered about 1.3 cm from the tear edges are visible in the radiograph, as is a tear (5.1 cm) running diagonally from the picture's left edge. The tear probably occurred early in the painting's history. The new Beva-371 lining is comprised of a linen layer interleaved with a stiff acrylic awning fabric. The six-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher is old and may be original. At the time of relining, a colorman's stamp was found on the reverse of the original fabric, though the name is not currently recorded. There are scattered age cracks throughout, and some diagonal cracks in the upper right. Some traction cracks in the apples and the dark purple background have the secondary ground layer oozing up to the surface. The picture was cleaned of grime, several layers of discolored varnish, and extensive retouchings in 1992. There are a few old natural resin varnish residues in the basket and grapes. Besides the large tear restoration, there are smaller retouches in the lower apple in the basket, the upper right corner, and the traction cracks in the left background. The tear restoration is visible in ultraviolet light and faintly visible in reflected light. The surface coating has a soft overall gloss.

The ground and paint layer structure is complicated and thick, giving much of the surface a somewhat lumpy and padded appearance. The original commercial priming layer is an off-white color. There seems to be a grayish white paint layer, unevenly applied by the artist with a trowel, to cover or reground the surface to obliterate an earlier image. This second ground layer stops 0.6 cm short of all the edges, leaving a heavy lip of paint. A dark green undercolor, extending onto the lower unpainted border and the center left edge, may be part of a first image that appears to have been scraped off prior to receiving the second priming. The wide, very black underdrawing lines, which form the entire image, possibly from an oiled charcoal stick, can be seen in infrared reflectography and in low magnification. The lines surrounding the apples can be seen with the unaided eye in skips in the final paint. There may be some alteration in the image in the upper right curtain, where two small eye-shapes are revealed in infrared, and what looks like drapery changes are seen in the radiograph. The X-ray films also show small, pale-colored shapes visible in the upper left, now covered by the uniform background color. Pinholes in the upper right corner and the center right edge may indicate that the picture was painted while pinned to a board, then stretched. The dry, paste consistency paint is applied wet-into-wet, using unblended strokes for many passages. Multiple layers of paint define the basket, and a wide brush was used to lay in the tablecloth design after the rest of the composition was in place.

1. D 5–8, 186, 233–34, 661–62. Several of these pictures were sold to dealers or acquired by collectors during Sisley's lifetime.

2. D 233. The high viewpoint and complex interplay of curves in both paintings is vividly evoked by Christopher Lloyd in *London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93*, p. 174. The two pictures are also compared in *Washington–Boston 2001–2*, pp. 106–8.
3. Examination of the canvas and X-ray analysis show that two tears were sustained in this area, apparently many years ago; see Technical Report.
4. Sisley's financial straits in the early 1880s are summarized in *London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93*, pp. 267–68. The suggestion that this picture was painted over an earlier image (see Technical Report) may also reflect Sisley's poverty.
5. For links with these artists, see *London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93*, p. 174, and *Washington–Boston 2001–2*, pp. 90, 106–8. Monet's painting is W 546. The distinctive diagonal of the knife appears repeatedly in Manet and Cézanne, as well as in Sisley's earlier still life, *Still Life with Apples* (D 7).
6. The Clark painting is dated 1876 by Daulte (D 234), though no reasons are given. A label of uncertain age on the back of the companion work in Boston also gives this date, perhaps following Daulte.
7. W 544–48, 625–31.
8. The companion work in Boston was bought by Durand-Ruel in 1881, along with a number of other pictures by Sisley. It seems likely, therefore, that *Apples and Grapes in a Basket* was also completed by that date, though there is no evidence that the Clark painting was among these acquisitions. At the time, Sisley and his family were living in Veneux-Nadon, near Moret, where the Clark's *Banks of the Seine at By* (cat. 306) was also painted. Nothing is known about the circumstances under which the picture left Sisley's possession.
9. Some comparisons between the landscapes of Cézanne and Sisley in the 1860s are suggested by MaryAnne Stevens in *London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93*, pp. 12, 176.
10. Rewald 1996, nos. 329, 337, 348. See also Berson 1996, vol. 2, p. 70, nos. III-17–III-19.
11. Traces of such drawing have been found under a number of Sisley's paintings: see, for example, cat. 304.
12. The artist may have used one of his own earlier or rejected canvases for this picture, spreading a new pale ground over the previous image (the presence of lead white in this ground precludes X-ray examination of the initial composition). An unusual margin of unpainted ground around the edges of the painting, within the confines of the "fold-over" cracks that correspond to the stretcher edges, also seems to suggest such a procedure and perhaps indicates that the present image was painted within an existing frame. Fine strokes of green at the lower edge of this margin point to a landscape subject for the original work.