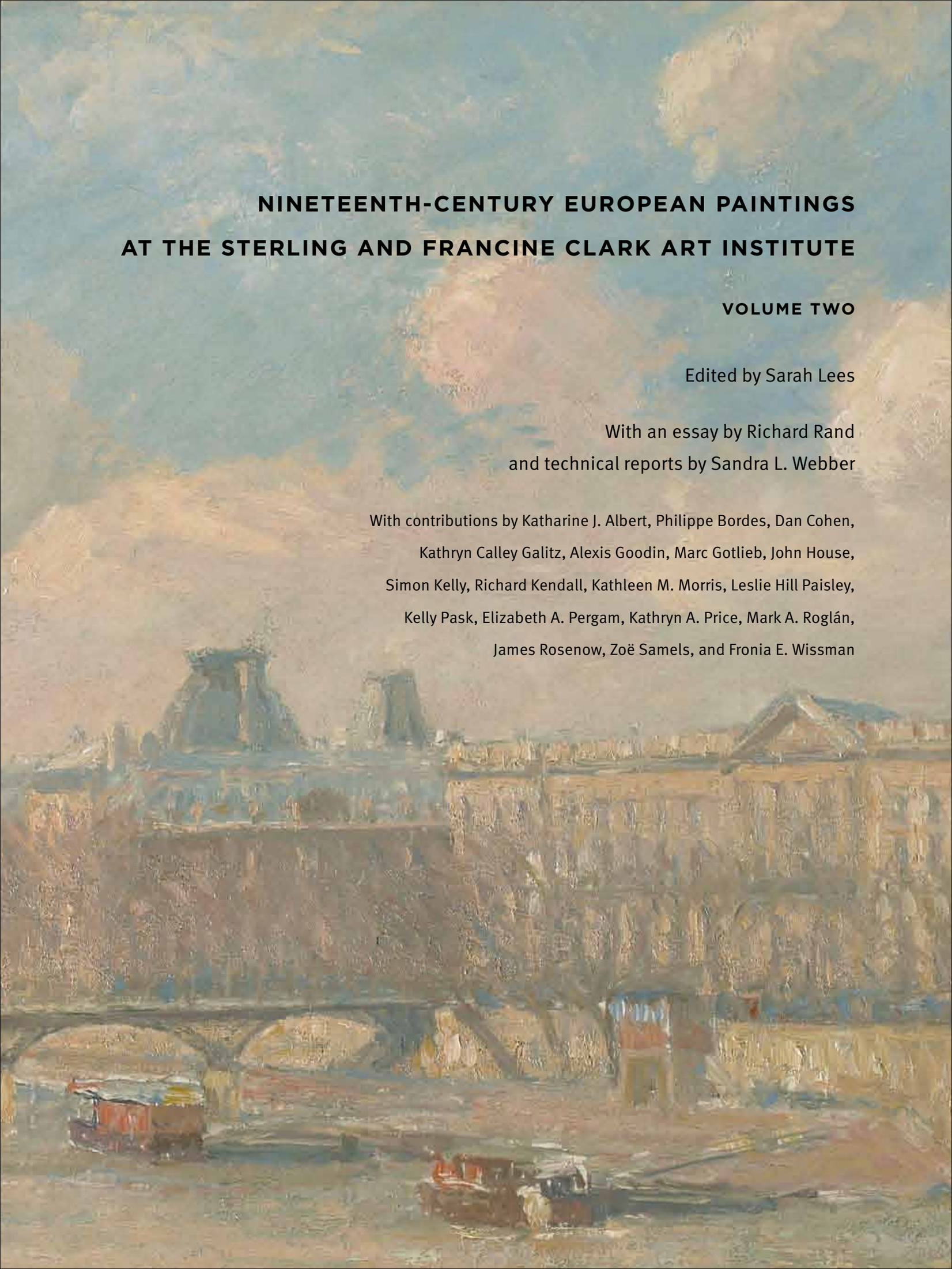

NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE

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, Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley, Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán, James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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306 | **Banks of the Seine at By** c. 1880–81

Oil on canvas, 54.3 x 73.3 cm
Lower left: Sisley.
1955.534

During the 1870s, Sisley showed an almost obsessive tendency to arrange his landscapes around a diagonal. In literally hundreds of compositions, the viewer is led from foreground to distance through an angled road or street, an oblique bridge, a tapering avenues of trees, a sloping hillside, or the receding lines of a river. Painted at the beginning of the next decade, *Banks of the Seine at By* shows the artist moving beyond this formula, softening the thrust of his perspective and complicating our encounter with the picture's subject. Here a familiar fan of lines within the scene converges just below the canvas center, drawing us into the lush countryside as if we, too, are advancing along the edge of the Seine. But our progress is slowed or diverted at several points; first by the enigmatic young girl in a blue dress; then by a screen-like plane of trees, foliage, and shadows; and finally by the obscurity of the horizon. Now we read the scene from left to right as well as into depth, lingering over the intricate pattern of brush marks and colors on the surface, and hints of rooftops and white walls within it. Rustic experience, Sisley seems to tell us, can be both alluring and elusive.

After his move to the environs of Moret-sur-Loing in 1880, a letter from Sisley to Claude Monet described the "rather . . . chocolate-box" charm of the town itself, which he was to paint later in the decade.[1] Settling in nearby Veneux-Nadon, where the Clark's *Apples and Grapes in a Basket* (cat. 305) was probably created, Sisley soon embarked on a group of pictures that were centered on the local rivers and the Loing canal.[2] While some followed a severely horizontal design—another format favored by the artist—others were variations on the painterly potential of its occluded vista and the richly textured middle ground. Among the first of the sequence may have been *Banks of the Seine at By*, where the artist looked

westward in the direction of the village now known as By-Thomery.[3] Literally turning his back on the human activity of neighboring settlements and on the modern railway line to Paris, he opted for greater thematic neutrality. These pictures offer little but overcast skies and ribbons of water, empty reed beds and modest cottages, and largely deserted trails that meander through unruly vegetation. The very plainness of the terrain, however, lent itself ideally to Sisley's mastery of nuance, allowing him to explore subtleties of light, color, and atmosphere, and to respond to commonplace dramas of weather.

The "vitality of handling" and "exuberance of subject and colour" in *Banks of the Seine at By* seem to introduce "a new note in Sisley's work," in the words of Richard Shone.[4] Dominated by steely gray-blue and deep green, the picture was painted over a heavily tinted ground that asserts its fundamental sobriety. Countering this, touches of crimson and pink throughout the rectangle bring an unexpected warmth to trees, branches, and pathway, while a scattering of small white and yellow flowers defines the season as spring.[5] The result is both stormy and vivacious, suggesting the immediate aftermath of rain when the tints of nature are at their freshest. The inventive way in which Sisley re-created these effects is evident at close quarters, where crisp, directly applied paint has been used to build up his design, apparently without drawing of any kind.[6] As he worked from breadth toward a remarkable skein of detail, tree trunks were broadly indicated and the blues of the sky established, then twigs and leaves added with progressively finer touches. The embankment and river were developed in a similar sequence and with an equally expressive range of brushstrokes, from the sensuous gesture of the wrist to the feather-light line or accent. Though a number of adjustments were made in wet paint over dry, the image speaks of urgent but controlled improvisation, with some colors mixed spontaneously as Sisley transferred them to canvas and left glimpses of grayish ground visible at many points.

Given the intricacy of its composition and the occasional layering of paint, it is unlikely that *Banks of the Seine at By* was completed in a single session. Whatever the circumstances of its making, the picture remains a tour de force of mature Impressionism, endorsing the high opinion of Sisley's abilities held by fellow-artists such as Monet and Camille Pissarro. If Sisley was more single-minded than his colleagues, he clearly shared with them a wish to extend and enrich his art in the new decade. Seen together, the Moret paintings can take on a series-like quality, as if he were surveying the locality in a continuous pictorial project. A companion work to the Clark picture, *The Small Meadows in Spring* (Tate Britain, London), might almost depict a later moment from the same outing, further along the riverbank but under similarly dramatic light.[7] Tellingly, it also includes the blue-clad girl, thought to represent Sisley's daughter, Jeanne, whose prominence as a human subject is uncharacteristic of his oeuvre. Perhaps representing an experiment in another pictorial mode, this departure reminds us that the artist's fragile finances currently obliged him to pursue alternative markets. In both 1880 and 1881, he declined to exhibit with the Impressionist group, in a failed attempt to have his work accepted at the Salon.[8] By introducing the narrative implications of the girl, admittedly in a tentative fashion and—in the case of *Banks of the Seine at By*, at the last minute—Sisley may have been reaching out to more conventional tastes.[9] RK

PROVENANCE [Gaston-Alexandre Camentron, Paris, sold to Durand-Ruel, 25 Aug. 1891];[10] [Durand-Ruel, Paris, possibly transferred to New York in 1897]; [Durand-Ruel, New York, possibly from 1897–1948, sold to Clark, 11 May 1948, as *Bords de la Seine à By, Printemps*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1948–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS San Francisco 1939, no. 162, ill., lent by Durand-Ruel, New York; Williamstown 1956a, no. 126, pl. 43; Springfield 1988, p. 41, no. 24, ill.; Nagoya–Nara–Hiroshima 1991, no. 18, ill.; London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, pp. 182, 188, 190–91, no. 48, ill.; Ferrara–Madrid–Lyon 2002–3, pp. 202–3, 393, no. 43, ill. (exhibited in Madrid and Lyon only).

REFERENCES Durand-Ruel 1948, pl. 14; Daulte 1959, no. 392, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 139, ill.; Shone 1992, p. 134; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, p. 104.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a very finely woven linen (31 threads/cm) with a twentieth-century glue lining. The coarse, bleached, double-weave lining fabric (13 double threads/cm) may have been applied by Beers Brothers. The stretcher, possibly original, is a five-member mortise-and-tenon design. The center crossbar also bears a pencil inscription, "Bords de la Seine Près de By Matinée Printemps," which is more visible in infrared reflectography. The painting was cleaned in 1980 of a gray-yellow coating. In ultraviolet light, there is spotty fluorescence of earlier natural resin residues in the green middle ground. In general, the paint is in excellent condition, with only occasional moating to the most prominent impastos. The reflectance is matte.

The ground is a water-sensitive commercially applied layer. Its pinkish-gray color is visible throughout the surface. There was no elaborate underdrawing found with infrared light. A few dark lines, discovered in the branches of the left stand of trees, had been painted over by the sky color, with new branches added after the sky was completed. The surface was executed in medium-rich strokes in an open, dry-looking manner. Wet-into-wet paint seems to appear only in the thicker foreground areas. In general, the tree trunks and some branches were laid in first, followed by the sky, and then the wispier branches. The figures were painted over the grass, and the roadway was laid in after the grass was completed, but in a reserve left for it. Small holes in the front corners suggest that the picture may have been painted while pinned to a board and later stretched.

1. See Sylvie Patin, "Veneux-Nadon and Moret-sur-Loing: 1880–1899," in London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, p. 184. In the same letter, Sisley pointed out that Moret was "two hours away from Paris" by train.
2. In 1882, Sisley moved to Moret from his home in Veneux-Nadon, near the site of the picture. It has been assumed, therefore, that *Banks of the Seine at By* was painted between 1880 and his departure for Moret. For a map of the area and the proposed sites of these paintings, see London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, p. 182. The rivers in question were the Seine and the Loing: the latter was joined at Moret by the Loing canal.
3. The site is described by William Johnston in London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, pp. 188 and 190.
4. Shone 1992, p. 134.
5. The same purplish crimson is used for the artist's signature, suggesting that this range of reds and pinks was added or extended toward the end of the painting process, in a final animation of the scene.
6. Examples of drawings that relate to Sisley's landscape paintings have been preserved, though the majority are clearly records of—rather than studies for—such pictures: see London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, pp. 192, 204, 206, 208, and 210. Richard Brettell argues that Sisley may also have used sketchbooks in the preparation of such works (London–Amsterdam–Williamstown 2000–2001, p. 190). Sisley's only surviving sketchbook, now in the Louvre, is discussed in London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, p. 204. Dealing with landscapes of 1883–85, it is thought by some scholars to be a record of completed paintings, not a series of preparatory studies.
7. D 391. See the entry on this work by William Johnston in London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, p. 188. The argument that the painting shows the landscape in springtime also seems applicable to *Banks of the Seine at By*. Johnston points out that the projection of the shadows in *The Small Meadows in Spring* toward the northeast indicates a time "late in the day"; conversely, the southwest direction of the shadows in the Clark canvas would therefore suggest morning.
8. The identity of the works he submitted is not known.
9. The figure was added over a passage of already dry paint; see Technical Report.
10. Notes in the Clark's curatorial file and a 1956 letter from Henri Elfers mistakenly indicate that Durand-Ruel bought *Banks of the Seine at By* directly from the artist.

307 | The Loing and the Mills of Moret, Snow Effect 1891

Oil on canvas, 58.7 x 81.6 cm
Lower left: Sisley 91
1955.545

Of the four paintings by Sisley that were acquired by Sterling Clark, *The Loing and the Mills of Moret, Snow Effect* was both the latest in the artist's career and—paradoxically—the closest to early Impressionist practice. Unlike the other three pictures, for example, it was probably executed in a single session, without subsequent modification or extensive work in the studio.[1] Such river subjects had been favored by Sisley and his colleagues almost from the beginning of their collective venture, encouraging them to find equivalents in paint for land, water, and sky, and the vibrancy of atmosphere. Characteristic also was Sisley's knowledge of the territory in question, which he depicted at different seasons and in various technical registers for almost a decade. In the Clark canvas, the delicacy of his technique and its appropriateness to the chosen scene are immediately striking. Throughout, the brushwork is liquid and supple, spreading thin, pale colors across the surface in response to the flow of the river and the bright winter air. Broader strokes capture the turbulence beneath the mill at right and the progression of water downstream, while feathery touches of gold suggest poplar trees on the opposite bank and slashes of blue become their shadows. Applied into still-wet paint, these marks seem to encapsulate moments of perception and the thrill of nature directly encountered.[2]

In 1880, Sisley had moved to the area of Moret-sur-Loing, near Fontainebleau, slowly extending his rural repertoire to embrace the challenge of the town itself.[3] Known for its picturesque river crossing and