



**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,  
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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## Alfred Sisley

English, 1839–1899

### 304 | The Thames at Hampton Court 1874

Oil on canvas, 38.1 x 55.2 cm

Lower left: Sisley. 74

1955.560

In a letter written toward the end of his life, Sisley recalled how he had once “spent some months at Hampton Court near London, where I did some important studies. I am not sure if you know it, it is a charming place.”<sup>1</sup> Given the scarcity of Sisley’s statements about his art in general, this brief testimony to the works made in England is worthy of attention. Little else is known about the trip itself, except that Sisley—whose father was English—made the journey in July 1874 with Jean-Baptiste Faure, the renowned opera singer and collector, who was to acquire six of the paintings that resulted.<sup>2</sup> Shortly before he left Paris, the thirty-three-year-old artist had participated in the first of the controversial series of Impressionist exhibitions, where his own submissions were almost univer-

sally praised.<sup>3</sup> His five canvases showed river views, farmland, and a village street, themes that would soon typify his mature oeuvre, while the “poetic” and “harmonious” qualities admired by visitors helped to set the tone for his later reception.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent period in London seems to have encouraged Sisley to consolidate this achievement and extend its boundaries. Now focusing on a single stretch of the River Thames, he created more than a dozen variations on the locality in a way that would become habitual as the years passed.<sup>5</sup> High, bright skies and the horizontal incidents of the summer landscape were common to many, bridges and locks were more boldly stated than previously, and clusters of small figures increasingly animated the distance.

*The Thames at Hampton Court* is one of the most serene of this group, its tranquility disturbed only by the advancing sailboats at right. Sisley has reduced his means to a near minimum, contrasting distant detail with a ripple of foreground activity, a towering expanse of cloud with the bands of “beautiful blue water” noted by Sterling Clark.<sup>6</sup> At left, a coarsely textured tree is echoed by the dark foliage on the opposite bank, which in turn leads our eye to the finely inflected buildings on the horizon. It was in such interplay between care-

fully judged values that Sisley excelled, earning him praise a few months earlier for capturing “so perfectly the physical sensation of the atmosphere, of the open air.”<sup>7</sup> Unusually, a second version of the view was also made, repeating the majority of its features in a canvas with a more pronounced horizontal format (fig. 304.1). In all probability, the Clark picture was the earlier of the two, since X-ray examination has revealed extensive changes to its composition before Sisley arrived at the design that was eventually common to both (fig. 304.2). Beneath the visible paint surface, for example, tall trees appear to have been present at center and right in the original Clark scheme, along with lower shrubs or waterside plants in the area now occupied by boats.<sup>8</sup> Just as distinctive in the early draft would have been the significantly higher profile of the principal clump of foliage across the river, thus implying a closer vantage point for the artist. Evidently dissatisfied with this arrangement, Sisley brushed over many of the forms in question with the pale lavender of the cloud bank and reworked parts of the nearby water.<sup>9</sup>

Typically sensitive to the character of buildings, Sisley displayed a notable interest in those beside rivers and canals, from the modern pumping station on the Seine (in a painting exhibited in 1874) to the traditional inns, cottages, and lockkeepers’ houses in several of the London paintings.<sup>10</sup> At right in the Clark picture, we see an ornate, red brick edifice, with some grander, more extensive structures in the center and further back. Despite their particularity and their clear locations beside the Thames, considerable discussion about the identity of these buildings has taken place. In a small publication devoted to the sites of the London sequence, Nicholas Reed called *The Thames at Hampton Court* “the most problematic picture in the whole series” and offered two alternative solutions to the conundrum.<sup>11</sup> The first proposes that the house Sisley introduced into the foreground was that of David Garrick, the famous actor-contemporary of William Hogarth, which is still situated on the north bank of the river to the west of Hampton Court.<sup>12</sup> Reed acknowledged, however, that this precludes any connection between the painted complex in the distance and the Royal Palace of Hampton Court, which it otherwise resembles and with which other authors have linked it.<sup>13</sup> A second hypothesis places the artist further to the east, where he might have glimpsed the Palace at his left and found himself close to a pavilion designed by Sir Christopher Wren immediately across the river, which survives today. Structural changes in



Fig. 304.1 Alfred Sisley, *The Thames at Hampton Court*, 1874. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

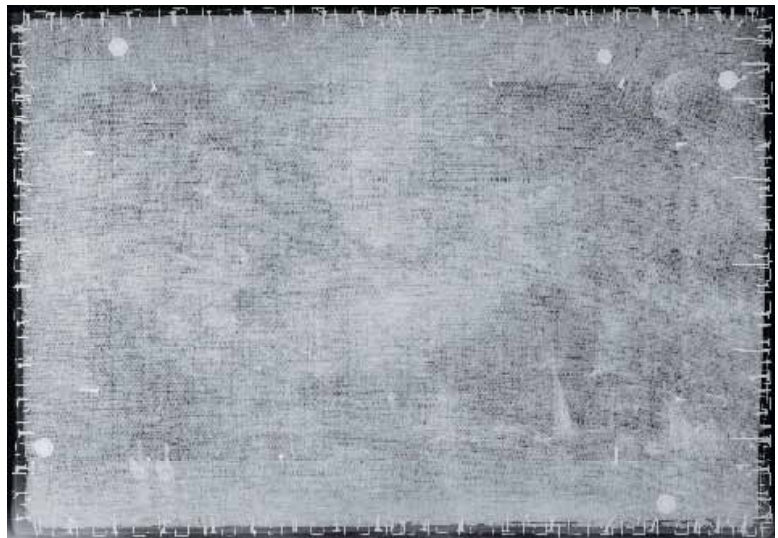


Fig. 304.2 X-radiograph of *The Thames at Hampton Court*

this building and a lack of precise documentation leave the issues somewhat unresolved, but we should note from the recent X-ray of the Clark scene that Sisley was evidently willing to rearrange pictorial elements, and perhaps the local topography, as he labored over one of the “important studies” made at Hampton Court. RK

**PROVENANCE** [Carroll Carstairs, New York, sold to Clark, 6 Mar. 1937]; Robert Sterling Clark (1937–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Williamstown 1956a, no. 127, pl. 44; London 1973a, p. 62, no. 39, ill.; New York 1983c, no cat.; London–Dublin 1995, p. 191, no. 204, ill. (exhibited in London only).

**REFERENCES** Daulte 1959, no. 115, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 140, ill.; Cogniat 1978, p. 28, ill.; Kingston-upon-Thames 1991, pp. 38–41, ill.; Gale 1992, pp. 80–81, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a moderate-weight linen (25 x 22 threads/cm) with an old glue lining of slightly coarser linen (19 threads/cm). Some lumpiness in the lining, possibly caused by the irregular thread sizes of the original fabric, was noted in a 1980 examination. The stretcher is the original five-member mortise-and-tenon model with a vertical crossbar. There is slight dishing of the support in the lower left. The picture is extended by 0.6 cm on three sides, beyond the trimmed tacking margins, and part of the tacking margin can be found on the surface along the lower edge. Fine aperture mechanical cracks are scattered in the surface, and old shattered paint damage in the right sky at the horizon is likely the reason for the lining. The paint layer is in good condition, although some impastos are slightly flattened from the lining pressure. The painting was cleaned in 1939, probably by Murray. Multiple discolored coatings were removed in 1980, together with a few residues of the old varnish trapped alongside several impastos and in the trees. The varnish layer is thin, with a drippy appearance in the sky under ultraviolet light, and a fairly matte sheen.

The ground is a commercially applied warm pinkish color, which is used as part of the tone in the upper sky. Lines of charcoal dust are scattered in the upper part of the visible image at the top of the left trees and along the greenery at center left. There are also charcoal underdrawing lines and paint shadows associated with a slightly different layout, which are visible using infrared reflectography. Tree branches were drawn in the sky to the left of center, and the foliage had a higher profile running from the right edge all the way across the horizon. On close inspection, some of the darker golden foliage color can be seen lying below the right sky. There are also some anomalous vertical golden brushstrokes buried below the water in the lower left. In the X-radiograph, there is an additional sailboat, with a reflection, in the right foreground. The dark trees at right were probably applied on top of the sky paint. The paste-consistency paint was applied wet-into-wet in a thin sketchy manner for the sky and in thicker strokes for the foreground. In general, the paint is thinner on the left side of the image.

1. Alfred Sisley to Adolphe Tavernier, 19 Jan. 1892; translation from Shone 1992, pp. 216–17.
2. For the London visit, see London 1973a, pp. 59–61. Faure was also the owner of Monet's *The Geese* (cat. 224). The link with Faure is reported in Duret 1906, p. 122: "En 1874, M. Faure, le baryton de l'Opéra, l'emmena en Angleterre."
3. For Sisley's exhibited works, see Berson 1996, vol. 2, nos. I-161, I-164, and I-HC 3.
4. Castagnary 1874, p. 3; reprinted in Berson 1996, vol. 1,

- p. 16: "poétique"; Silvestre 1874; reprinted in Berson 1996, vol. 1, p. 39: "harmonieux."
5. Daulte 1959 lists thirteen pictures of the Hampton Court area (D 114–126). Additions to this total are cited in London 1973a and London–Paris–Baltimore 1992–93, pp. 130–141.
6. RSC Diary, 5 Mar. 1937. His acquisition of the work is noted in the entry for the following day.
7. Chesneau 1874; reprinted in Berson 1996, p. 19: "d'une façon si complète, si parfaite la sensation physique de l'atmosphère, du 'plein air.'"
8. The X-ray image shows vertical and diagonal branch- and trunk-like forms in these areas, though their identity and extent is unclear. See also note 9.
9. Several areas of the picture surface indicate reworking by the artist and the superimposition of paint layers, perhaps to revise or obliterate earlier stages. The large tree at left, for example, is lightly brushed over coarser, dry marks, and the section above the clump of trees is more thickly painted than the rest of the sky, presumably to conceal the darker area beneath. The broad similarity between the earlier and revised compositions makes it unlikely that Sisley reused an abandoned canvas of a different motif. Despite the complexity of paint layers, some dark particles of charcoal from Sisley's original drawing can be glimpsed at certain points on the canvas surface.
10. The paintings in question are D 67, 119, 120, 123, 125, and 126.
11. Kingston-upon-Thames 1991, p. 38.
12. Reed reproduces a photograph of 1903 (Kingston-upon-Thames 1991, p. 39) that shows Garrick's house with a stand of trees behind it, the whole somewhat resembling the Clark group. At left in this photograph is the squarish tower of Hampton church, clearly identifying this site. Yet none of these features is consistent with a view of Hampton Court Palace from this position. The situation is further complicated in the Clark canvas by a faint indication of a squarish structure, which might be a church tower, above a group of distant trees to the left of center. In the structurally similar D 117, the tower of Hampton Church is present at almost exactly this spot.
13. See, for example, Gale 1992, p. 80. Distant though it is, Sisley has taken the trouble when painting Hampton Court to indicate fine crenellations on the top of the horizontal red brick building, of a kind found at Hampton Court Palace.