

Juan Ángel López-Manzanares



Fig. 1
Alfred Sisley
Flood at Port-Marly, 1876
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection on loan
at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 2.
Michelangelo
The Flood, ca. 1508-1512
Sistine Chapel, the Vatican

Fig. 3
Nicolas Poussin
Winter or The Deluge, 1660-1664
Musée du Louvre, Paris

In March 1876 the River Seine burst its banks at the harbour of Port-Marly, situated at the foot of Marly-le-Roi. Alfred Sisley (1839-1899), who had taken up residence in the town at the end of 1874, took the opportunity to paint a series of works on the flood. Now regarded as crowning achievements in the English artist's career and a milestone in the evolution of Impressionism, they reveal an extraordinary harmony and luminosity. One of the works (fig. 1), owned by the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, offers us a chance to make a detailed study of Sisley's contribution.

1 "It's nothing but water and people drowning"

Flooding as an artistic motif can be traced back to the Great Flood that Michelangelo (1475-1564) painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel between 1508 and 1512 (fig. 2). Both Michelangelo and other artists who dealt with the theme, such as Leandro Bassano (1557-1622), Carlo Saraceni (c. 1579-1620) and Antonio Carracci (c. 1583-1618), focus on the victims of the tragedy in their respective works. Their vast number accentuates the cosmic nature of the event while simultaneously minimising any possible development of the landscape.

Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) was the first to give landscape an unprecedented prominence in his work entitled *Winter* (1660-64), also known as *The Deluge* (fig. 3). In fact, we only know that this is a painting of the biblical flood because of the ark in the background and the heroic nature of the figures represented. These are relatively few in number and, unlike previous works on the same theme, they are situated at an intermediate distance from the observer. In contrast, Poussin shows himself to be a shrewd observer of atmospheric phenomena in his depiction of the lightning and the heavy clouds blocking the sun. It was this naturalism that led the critic and essayist André Félibien to claim: "It's nothing but water and people drowning".¹

2 En plein air

With works such as *Winter*, Poussin laid the foundations for "heroic" or "historical" landscapes, a genre that would only be officially recognised a century and a half later by the Neoclassical painter Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819), who considered it second only to history painting. However, Valenciennes is best known for having codified and systematised a hitherto sporadic practice: painting small studies outdoors, *en plein air*. In his essay *Éléments de perspective pratique* (1800), he argued that painting outdoors was a vital part of the learning process and an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the great heroic landscape compositions produced in the studio.



Fig. 4
Paul Huet
Flood at Saint-Cloud, 1855
Musée du Louvre, Paris

On the subject of storms and the floods that often arise from them, Valenciennes urged young artists to “study the sublime scenes of a spectacle that cannot be admired without a shudder,” not hesitating to paint before their eyes scenes such as the following: “Large heavy drops announce the rain, which suddenly becomes a downpour; the condensed clouds, now grown too heavy for the air that supports them, plunge down almost en masse; torrents form, which grow and overflow, sweeping away earth, rocks, trees, animals and anything else that the rapid, muddy waters find in their path”.²

However, because of the difficulty of capturing these phenomena in the outdoors, floods were not a frequent theme among the artists who began to paint en plein air in the late 18th and early 19th century. One of the rare exceptions is the painting *Flood at Saint-Cloud*, 1855 (Musée du Louvre, Paris), in which Paul Huet (1803-1869) depicted the overflowing waters of the River Seine (fig. 4). Even so, this is a large-format work painted entirely in the studio, possibly from earlier sketches, and, in keeping with Valenciennes’s exhortations about final compositions, it underscores human distress much more emphatically than the destructive force of nature.

3 “They are very sad pictures, but beautiful too in their sadness!”

Of all the floods that occurred in France during the 19th century, one of the most catastrophic was when the River Rhone and its tributary the Saone burst their banks late in May of 1856, causing the water level to rise by nearly eight metres in Lyon, Avignon, Tarascon and other small towns in south-east France. The number of fields flooded and houses destroyed by the water was such that Emperor Napoleon III himself was obliged to visit the worst-hit towns with a group of his ministers. This event would give rise to the well-known paintings by Hippolyte Lazerges (1817-1887) and William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905).

The photographer Édouard Baldus (1813-1889) arrived in Lyon four days after Napoleon with the mission of creating a series of negatives on the effects of the flood.³ At the time, Baldus was working on an official assignment to photograph the New Louvre and had previously produced vistas of Roman and medieval monuments in the south of France. When he reached Lyon, Avignon and Tarascon, the rivers were already returning to their usual levels. Over the course of eight days he produced 25 negatives, but rather than capturing the terrible consequences of the flood, he focused his attention on the semi-dilapidated buildings and the large pools of receding water (fig. 5). In contrast to the paintings by Bouguereau and Lazerges, his photographs eschew a direct confrontation with the tragedy, and yet they cannot avoid a certain cosmic symbolism, as if the water itself had erased all trace of human presence. Fascinated by this combination of reportage



Fig. 5
Édouard Baldus
Flood at Lyon, Les Brotteaux, 1856
Musée d’Orsay, Paris



Fig. 6
Charles-François Daubigny
Flood at Billancourt, ca. 1866
Private Collection



Fig. 7
Claude Monet
Flood at Argenteuil, 1872
Bridgestone Museum of Art,
Ishibashi Foundation, Tokyo



Fig. 8
Alfred Sisley
Flood at Port-Marly, 1872
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Fig. 9
Alfred Sisley
The Boat during the Flood, Port-Marly, 1876
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

and aestheticism, the critic Ernest Lacan would eloquently declare: "They are very sad pictures, but beautiful too in their sadness!"⁴

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878) also opted to let the Seine return to its normal level before painting *Flood at Billancourt* around 1866 (fig. 6). As in the photographs by Baldus, this painting omits all reference to human suffering. Only a boat that has run aground and the broken trunk of a tree uprooted from the earth hint at the aftermath of the flood.

4 Port-Marly, 1872-1876

Sisley and Monet (1840-1926) met at the studio of the Swiss painter Charles Gleyre (1806-1874) in the early 1860s. Years later, in February 1872, they painted the streets of Argenteuil together, an event which marked Sisley's definitive assimilation of the Impressionist language that Monet and Renoir (1841-1919) had been using since 1869.

The Impressionists were drawn to the changing atmospheric conditions inherent to floods. At the same time, they were also interested in how – as with snow – the various parts of the landscape succumbed to a blanket unity. It is therefore not surprising that, towards the end of 1872, both Money and Sisley should have dedicated several works to the floods caused by the Seine. However, the two painters approached the theme from different angles. While Monet painted flooded trees in a practically natural setting (fig. 7), Sisley situated his paintings in the urban environment of Port-Marly. This context, as can be observed in the canvas at the National Gallery in Washington (fig. 8), lends greater stability to the English painter's works.

When Port-Marly was inundated again in 1876, Sisley painted another seven works that reflect different vistas and moments of the flood.⁵ In pictures such as those at the Musée d'Orsay (fig. 9) and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, Sisley explored the juxtaposition of solid elements with more fragile and fleeting things, such as reflections and clouds. At the same time, he also experimented with the combination of depth and other clearly flatter forms, such as the façade of the À St Nicolas tavern with its bright bands of colour and its dark openings reflected in the water. These are works of great luminosity and balance which, as has been pointed out, seem to evoke the tranquillity of the Venetian Lagoon rather than the destructive waters of the Seine.⁶

5 "Puddles of water mirroring the sky"

Throughout his career, Sisley was fond of constructing careful compositions around *repoussoirs* and vanishing points, following the example of painters such as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot



Fig. 10
Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
The Sin-le-Noble Road, near Douai, 1873
Musée du Louvre, Paris

(1796-1875) (fig. 10). In the picture *Flood at Port-Marly* belonging to the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection (fig. 1), the viewpoint chosen by the artist emphasises the linear perspective.

In this painting, a carriage situated at the intersection of Rue Paris – the old Saint-Germain road – and Rue Jean-Jaurès announces the return to normality after the flood. The eye is immediately drawn to the background, advancing in great discontinuous leaps along the south-east corner of the Lion d’Or inn – which juts out from the rest of the street – and the À St Nicolas tavern. The tree-lined avenue along the wharf also evokes a hurried pace, and even the arrangement of the puddles on the cobblestones and the clouds in the sky contribute to the sensation of a funnel perspective.⁷

However, perhaps the most salient aspect of the whole composition is the sky. On the importance of this element in his oeuvre, Sisley would tell the critic Adolphe Tavernier in 1892: “Objects should be painted with their own texture; moreover – and above all – they should be bathed in light just as they are in nature. [...] The sky must be the means of doing so (the sky cannot be a mere background). On the contrary, it not only helps to add depth through its planes (for the sky has planes just as the ground does), it also gives movement through its shape, and by its arrangement in relation to the effect or composition of the picture. Is there anything more splendid or thrilling than that which is frequently found in summer, I mean the blue sky with beautiful clouds, white and drifting? What movement, what allure they have! [...] As evidence: I always start a painting with the sky.”⁸

Although the canvas in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection features spring clouds rather than summer clouds, Sisley’s words seem to have been written with this specific canvas in mind. Meanwhile, his reference to the sky as the starting point for his pictures fits in perfectly with one of Valenciennes’s principal pieces of advice, which confirms Sisley’s adherence to the classical landscape tradition. But, above all, these words reveal his tremendous affinity with the work of John Constable (1776-1837), whose cloudscapes Sisley had greatly admired during his training in London in the 1850s (fig. 11), and whose influence would years later set him apart from his fellow Impressionists.⁹

Critics of Sisley’s oeuvre have always pointed out the importance of his cloudscapes. It could well have been the clouds in the picture in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection that the critic Georges Rivière was referring to when, in connection with Sisley’s contribution to the third Impressionist exhibition in 1877, he noted: “His wonderful landscape – a path after the rain, tall trees dripping with water, the wet ground, puddles of water mirroring the sky – is full of a charming lyricism.”¹⁰



Fig. 11
John Constable
The Valley Farm, 1835
Tate

Notes

- 1 André Félibien: *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellens peintres anciens et modernes (1666-1688), Entretien VIII*. Paris, 1685, p. 307; cit. in René Démoris: "De La tempestad a El diluvio". In *Poussin y la Naturaleza*. [Exh. cat.]. Bilbao, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2007, p. 99.
- 2 Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes: *Éléments de perspective pratique, à l'usage des artistes, suivis de réflexions et conseils à un élève sur le peinture, et particulièrement sur le genre du paysage* (2nd ed. revised, corrected and enlarged by the author). Paris, Aimé Payen, 1820, p. 219.
- 3 See: Malcolm Daniel: *The Photographs of Édouard Baldus*. [Exh. cat.]. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Arts, 1994.
- 4 Ernest Lacan: "Photographie historique". In *La Lumière*, 21 July 1856, p. 97 ; cit. in Malcolm Daniel: "Édouard Baldus, artiste photographe". In Daniel, op. cit. p. 70, note 171, p. 266.
- 5 See: *Sisley*. [Exh. cat.]. Paris, Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1992, pp. 170-175; Richard Shone: *Sisley*. London, Phaidon Press Limited, 1992, pp. 85-107; and Mary Anne Stevens and Ann Dumas: *Alfred Sisley: poeta del impresionismo*. [Exh. cat.]. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2002, pp. 171-207.
- 6 Robert Rosenblum: *Les peintures du Musée d'Orsay*. Paris, Éditions de la Martinière, 1995, p. 306.
- 7 Tomàs Llorens, in Javier Arnaldo: *Colección Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza*. Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 2004, vol. II, p. 46.
- 8 Alfred Sisley, cit. in Adolphe Tavernier: *L'Atelier de Sisley*. [Exh. cat.]. Galerie Bernheim Jeune, Paris, 2-14 December 1907; repr. in Shone, op. cit. p. 218.
- 9 Mary Anne Stevens: "Un pintor entre dos tradiciones". In Stevens / Dumas, op. cit., pp. 47-71.
- 10 Georges Rivière: "L'Exposition des impressionnistes". In *L'Impressionniste*, no. 2, 14 April 1877; repr. in Sisley. [Exh. cat.], op. cit., p. 291.