

Sisley in England and Wales

Exhibition at National Museum Cardiff

7 March-14 June 2009

Teachers' notes

Alfred Sisley (1839-1899)

Alfred Sisley was a British Impressionist landscape painter. He was born in Paris to English parents. Though he lived in France, he remained a British subject throughout his life and he visited the UK on a number of occasions. Two particular stays were painting visits: one in London in 1874 and one in Wales towards the end of his life in 1897. This exhibition concentrates on the paintings Alfred Sisley produced during these visits. It shows how he responded to the British landscape and way of life.

At the age of 18, Sisley spent 3 years in London as a business student. At this time his interest in art was growing. It is likely that he visited the National Gallery where he would have seen paintings of landscapes by British artists such as Joseph Mallord William Turner and John Constable. By the time he returned to Paris he had decided, and won his parents' approval, to work as an artist.

He began his career by studying at the studio of the Swiss artist Charles Gleyre. His fellow students included Claude Monet and Pierre Auguste Renoir. The group often worked alongside each another, challenging and inspiring each other to experiment with new painting techniques. They later become prominent members of the French Impressionist movement.

Impressionism

The Impressionist art movement began in the 1860s. It consisted of a group of artists working in Paris, which included Sisley, Monet, Renior and also Frederic Bazille, Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet and Mary Cassatt. These artists came together because they were all committed to painting directly from nature, *en plein air* - 'in the open air'.

The Impressionists worked outside because they wanted to paint ordinary scenes of everyday life. Rather than planning theatrical-looking scenes using posed figures in a studio they aimed to capture real life moments. They painted bustling city scenes in theatres and cafés as well as street scenes, buildings, docks and natural landscapes.

The Impressionists painted quickly to capture a fleeting moment. They applied short dabs of paint with brushes of assorted sizes and shapes. Each individual brushstroke is visible rather than smoothly blended.



Sunset, the Port of Rouen (Steamboats) 1898 by Camille Pissarro

They also painted outdoors because they wanted to show the effects of natural light. They studied light at different times of the day. Their paintings often show how light changes during different seasons and weather conditions.

To show the effects of natural light the Impressionists used bright, unmixed colours. They applied each colour separately. For the shadows they used colours that are complementary to those in lighter areas. As we stand back from an Impressionist painting the colours blend together in our eyes.

At the time, many people disliked the work of the Impressionists. They used the term 'impressionism' to insult the artists, implying that they could not paint properly, only create impressions or unfinished paintings. Fashionable artists painted in a studio. They would sometimes paint imaginative, religious or mythical scenes. They worked slowly, replicating precise details of things seen only on close observation. The painting below, *Bad News* by James Tissot, is an example. It has a high finish, the outlines of people and objects are hard and the brushstrokes are smooth and almost unnoticeable.



Bad News (The Parting) 1872 by James Tissot

The Impressionists believed that ordinary scenes of everyday life and the ever-changing effects of light offered a more truthful representation of reality. Their technique was also truthful - we rarely notice the elaborate details when we look at a scene or a view.

Sisley's technique and style

Sisley's paintings are typical of the Impressionist style. He constructed his landscapes with small coloured dabs of paint. If you were to look at his paintings closely you would see hundreds of quickly painted lines.

Sisley was faithful to the practice of painting outdoors and often painted more than one view of a single place. Some of the drawings in this exhibition relate directly to his oil paintings which suggest that he worked in a sketchbook first before starting on canvas with brush and paint.

Many of the Impressionists painted a range of subjects including city scenes, domestic scenes, portraits and still-lives. However, Sisley mainly painted landscapes.

Sisley visited the UK twice to paint the landscape. His first visit was to London in 1874 and his second visit was to Wales 1897.

Sisley's visit to England

Sisley returned to England in the summer of 1874, when he was 35 years of age. He was invited to join the opera singer Jean-Baptiste Faure, who was visiting London to do a season of performances. Faure invited Sisley because he wanted him to produce six paintings of England to remind him of his trip.

Perhaps Faure wanted Sisley to paint the landmarks in central London. Yet Sisley only produced one cityscape during his visit, *View of the River Thames: Charing Cross Bridge*. This is not completely surprising as he did not find central Paris an agreeable subject to paint. Perhaps he found the River Thames even noisier and more foul-smelling than the Seine in Paris!

Instead, Sisley travelled to Molesey, a suburb west of central London. There he painted views of the River Thames at Hampton Court. He was particularly interested in the effects the Industrial Revolution and modernisation had on the landscape, so his paintings of Hampton Court often combine natural and man-made forms.

Sisley was also fascinated by social scenes at Hampton Court, such as regattas, boating parties and people strolling along the riverbank. Hampton Court Palace is a significant site in British history; it is associated with many of Britain's monarchs, particularly King Henry VIII. The Court was therefore a popular tourist destination. It was easily accessible by train for day-trippers from London. The palaces only make minor appearances in Sisley's paintings. Sisley was very pro-modern and deliberately left out the Court in favour of painting modern life, which was in line with Impressionist ideals.

In all, Sisley produced a total of eighteen pictures during this visit to England.

Sisley's visit to Wales

Sisley visited south Wales in the summer of 1897. He was 57 years of age. He came with his long-term partner and the mother of his two children, Eugenie Lescouezec, who was 63 years old. There was a moving reason for their visit. In France the couple had always told people, even close friends, that they were married. Yet they had never married, because Sisley's family disapproved of Eugenie's lowly job as a florist.

Sisley arranged a ceremony in Cardiff, which he was able to do because he was a British national. A ceremony in France might have attracted a lot of unwanted attention. Their marriage was discreet and ensured that Sisley's paintings would be inherited by his children.

Sisley was not impressed with Cardiff. He described it as 'a coal mining city'. So the couple stayed in Penarth while arrangements for the wedding were made. He found the landscape there inspiring and he painted six pictures during his short stay. In a letter to a friend, art critic Gustave Geffroy, he wrote: 'the countryside is pretty and the roads [the shipping lanes], with big ships sailing into and out of Cardiff, are superb'.

Sisley and Eugenie married on 5 August 1897 at Cardiff Town Hall. They then travelled to Langland Bay on the Gower coast for their honeymoon. They stayed at the Osborne Hotel, one of the most exclusive hotels in Wales.

The couple returned to France by 25 September 1897. During his visit to Wales Sisley painted 20 views of Penarth and Langland Bay. These paintings are his only surviving seascapes. They capture the shimmering effects of light on the sea.

Historical events in the late 19th and early 20th century

Sisley was painting at a time when the shape of the landscape was changing dramatically. The changes were the result of the Industrial Revolution, which began in the 18th century. The Industrial Revolution was a time when many new technologies were invented. It had an impact on working life, travel and entertainment. It brought steam power, combustion engines and electronic power. People began to travel further, on ships, trains and trams. New factories were built as well as docks, railways and bridges.

Sisley began his trip to Wales by taking a ferry from France to Southampton docks. He then travelled across Britain by train. He described Cardiff as 'a coal mining city'. At that time, Cardiff was the commercial centre for the global coal industry. Coal was an important resource during the Industrial Revolution. Among other things it provided fuel for steam powered ships and trains.

Sisley shows the impact of industry on the landscape in many of his paintings, exploring the combination of natural and man-made forms.

Further resources

Books:

Sisley, by Richard Shone (Phaidon)

Alfred Sisley, by Mary Anne Stevens, Christopher Lloyd and Isabelle Cahn

Impressionism, by Jude Welton. (Eyewitness Art)

Picture This: Activities and Adventures in Impressionism, by Joyce Raimondo. (Art Explorers).

Impressionism, by Pam Cutler. (Flying StArt)

Impressionism and Postimpressionism: Artists, Writers, and Composers, by Sarah Halliwell. (Who & When)

Impressionism, by Karin H. Grimme and Norbert Wolf. (Taschen Basic Genre Series)

Impressionism: Origins, Practice, Reception, by Belinda Thomson. (World of Art)

Websites:

www.museumwales.ac.uk One of the sections on the Museum's website will let you explore individual artworks on your interactive whiteboard.

www.giverny.org/museums/american/kids/monetgb.htm

www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/sisley_alfred.html

www.artchive.com/artchive/S/sisley.html

www.nationalgallery.org.uk/collection/features/impressionists/default.htm

www.artchive.com/artchive/impressionism.html

www.bbc.co.uk/arts/multimedia/impressionism

<http://www.schoolshistory.org.uk/IndustrialRevolution/>

Bridge at Hampton Court, 1874

In this painting Sisley combines geometric man-made forms with reflections on water. The bridge in this picture crosses the River Thames, linking the town of East Molesey with Hampton Court Palace. Sisley was fascinated with this bridge because it was a newly built structure that represented the modern age. It was erected between 1864 and 1866 and was made of iron and brick. It is not the bridge we see at Hampton Court Palace today. The original bridge had to be replaced with one that could withstand the growing number of automobiles on the road.

Sisley positioned himself to one side of the bridge. The solid structure of the bridge and the supporting columns contrast with the shimmering water, which dominates the foreground. The reflection of the bridge and surrounding trees is conveyed by the dark dabs of coloured paint on the surface of the water.

Sisley has also captured the fleeting scene of everyday life in this painting. Groups of people on the opposite shore are strolling and walking alongside the River Thames. On the water two scull boats move quickly along the river.

Suggested questions:

- Describe what you see in the picture.
- Describe the shapes in the picture.
- Compare the bridge and the water. How are they different?
- Compare the brush strokes used for the bridge and the water. How are they different?
- How many different colours can you see in the water?
- How many colours can you see in the shadows?
- What is different about the colours in the lighter areas of the water compared with the colours we see in the shadows?
- What time of day do you think this was painted?
- Do you think this scene was painted from life or has it been made up?
- Where do you think the artist was standing when he painted it?
- What do you think the people on the opposite shore are doing?
- How would you feel if you were here?
- Can you see the rowers in the scull boats? Do you think the painting would be the same if the artist had arrived on the scene at a different time?
- What do you think Sisley could hear when he painted this painting?
- How do you think he was feeling?
- Why do you think he wanted to paint this scene?

The Cardiff Shipping Lane, 1897

This may have been Sisley's first painting of Penarth. He found the town inspiring. In a letter to a friend he wrote: 'the countryside is pretty and the roads [the shipping lanes], with big ships sailing into and out of Cardiff, are superb'. In the centre of the picture a small girl is looking out at sea. A woman, her companion, is seated on the ground near her. The woman and

child are watching ships and boats sailing to and from Cardiff Docks. We can see a paddle steamer approaching Penarth Pier to the left, which shows the changes that took place during the Industrial Revolution.

The foreground of the painting is dominated by two large trees. The foliage indicates the picture was painted in the summertime. Sisley made a number of sketches and drawings of this tree. He drew it from slightly different angles and vantage points.

Suggested questions:

- Describe what is happening in this scene.
- What do you think the girl and the woman are doing?
- Look at the sea, how many boats can you see?
- Where do you think they are going?
- How would you feel if you were here?
- What noises would you hear if you were here?
- What questions would you ask the women and the child in the painting?
- Do you think this scene was painted from life or has it been made up?
- Where do you think the artist was when he painted it?
- Describe the brushstrokes in the painting.
- Do you think the painting has been finished?
- What colours can you see in this painting?
- Think of words to describe the atmosphere in this painting.
- What time of day do you think this picture was painted? How can you tell it was painted at this time of day?
- At what time of year was it painted? How can you tell it was painted at this time of year?
- Why do you think he wanted to paint this scene?

The Cliffs at Penarth, Evening, Low Tide, 1897



This view of Penarth Beach is painted from the start of the cliff top walk linking Penarth and Lavernock. The island of Flat Holm can be seen in the background.

It was painted on a midsummer evening when the light was low. Pink light falls sharply across the shore. The cliffs are casting a mauve shadow over the beach below.

In this painting Sisley was fascinated by the geological structure of the cliffs at Penarth. Rocks that can be found on Penarth Beach include Red Mudstone and White Gypsum. Sisley has used the colour of these rocks in this painting.

Red Mudstone was formed 220 million years ago, at the beginning of the Jurassic period. At that time there were no cliffs in Penarth. South Wales was a low-lying desert. This desert was gradually covered by the sea. Eventually the soft mud, silt and sands left by the sea solidified into a pinkish rock.

Gypsum is a very soft mineral. When the sea advanced across Wales 210 million years ago it created lakes. The hills of the desert became islands in the sea. As the lake water gradually evaporated in the heat of the desert, crystals formed around the edges of the lake. Those crystals solidified into white gypsum.

Suggested questions:

- Describe the shapes and colours you see in this painting.
- How many different colours can you see?
- Do you think the artist really saw these colours?
- Describe the brushstrokes.
- Do you think the painting has been finished?
- Do you think this scene was painted from life or has it been made up?
- Where do you think the artist was when he painted it?
- What time of day do you think this was painted?
- Think of words to describe the atmosphere in this painting.
- How would you feel if you were here?
- What do you think Sisley could hear and smell when he painted this painting?
- How do you think he was feeling?
- Why do you think he wanted to paint this scene?

Storr's Rock, Lady's Cove, Evening, 1897

Sisley was fascinated by tidal falls. In this painting the sea is at high tide. The painting depicts a quiet evening scene. Purple shadows fall across the beach. Storr's Rock is the focal point of the painting. Sisley captures the effects of light and shade on its surface.

Sisley often painted in series. He made five other paintings of Storr's rock – two are in the exhibition. These paintings show how one place changes over the course of one day, from the morning to the evening. The direction of the light is constantly changing and the tide comes in and out, altering the appearance of the rock.

In *Storr's Rock, Lady's Cove, Evening* a figure of a young boy stands in the shadows. He gives the painting a sense of scale. Storr's Rock is still a popular haunt for visitors today. However, there is now a concrete breakwater that

links Storr's Rock to the rocky outcrops in the painting. It makes the scene look very different.

Suggested questions:

- Describe this scene.
- Can you see the young boy in the shadow?
- What do you think he is doing?
- How big do you think Storr's Rock is?
- Think of words to describe the atmosphere in this painting.
- Can you describe the weather? Would the boy be warm or cold?
- At what time of year was it painted? How can you tell it was painted at this time of year?
- What time of day do you think this picture was painted? How can you tell it was painted at this time of day?
- Can you name the colours Sisley has used in the areas where light is falling on Storr's Rock?
- Can you name the colours he has used for the areas of Storr's Rock that are in shadow?
- Look at *Storr's Rock, RotherSlade Bay, from below the Osborne Hotel* (1897).
- Is the light different in this painting? How is it different?
- What time of day do think it is?
- Where is the tide in the two pictures we have looked at? Is it high tide or low tide?
- Why do you think Sisley painted two pictures of the same scene?

Ideas for classroom activity

Provide pupils with the opportunity to experiment with paint, with a view to creating their own seascape.

Ask your pupils to choose their favourite painting by Sisley. Ask them to recreate a small section of that painting on a larger scale. Use pastels and crayons. They should look carefully at the colours Sisley uses, layering each colour separately and making quick, short marks like the artists.

Next, ask the children to paint a picture inspired by Sisley, using a photograph of the seaside. Ask your pupils to experiment with different brushstrokes, e.g. flattening the tip of the brush or pointing it. Ask them to explore different ways of applying the paint to the paper. Try using sponges, cotton buds and cloths of different textures as well as dripping or splattering paint to create a range of effects and marks.

Storr's Rock, Lady's Cove, Evening, 1897

Storr's Rock, Rotherslade Bay, from below the Osborne Hotel, 1897

These two paintings show the same scene at different times of the day. The direction of the light changes and the tide comes in and out, altering the appearance of the rock.

Describe the place Sisley has painted

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List the things that are the same in each picture.....

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Circle the words that best describe the weather in *Storr's Rock, Lady's Cove, Evening*:

Warm	Cool	Sunny	Rainy	Stormy	Still
Chilly	Hot	Calm	Cloudy	Frosty	Breezy

Look at the colours in *Storr's Rock, Lady's Cove, Evening*.

Describe the colours in the shadows.....

Describe the colours in the light areas.....

Why do you think Sisley painted so many pictures of the same scene?

.....

.....

Sketch one of the paintings in the box below.

Write some notes on your drawing, anything that will help you to remember the painting better.



The Cardiff Shipping Lane, 1897

Describe what you can see in this picture

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Imagine you are standing on the cliffs with the young girl in the picture.

Describe the noises you can hear.....

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Think of three questions you would like to ask the girl:

1.....

2.....

3.....

Can you think of the answers she would give you?

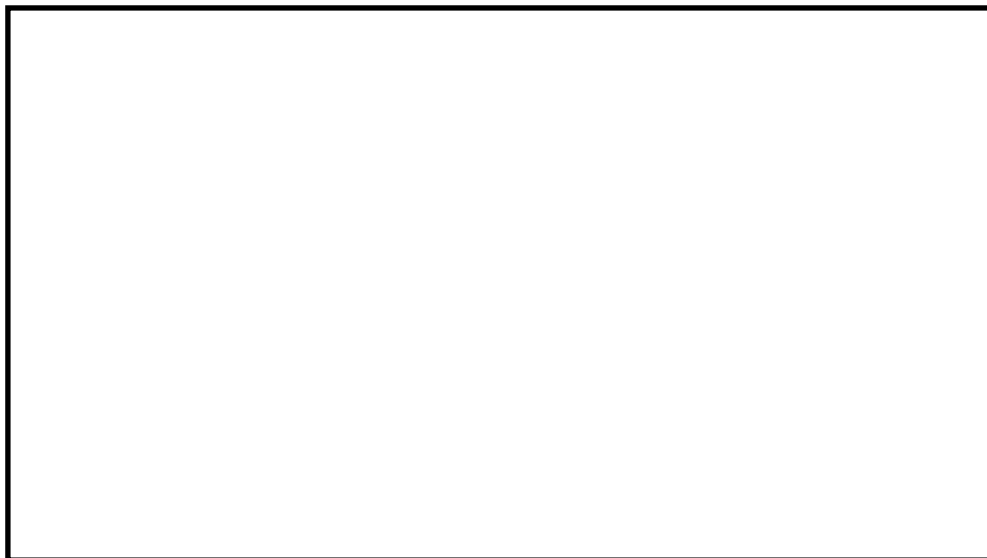
1.....

2.....

3.....

Sketch the painting in the box below.

Write some notes on your drawing, anything that will help you to remember the painting better.



Alfred Sisley in Penarth

Sisley worked in **series** – he made many paintings of the same view. Look at all his paintings of Penarth together. Sisley probably worked on his paintings **simultaneously** – that is at the same time, turning his easel in different directions.

1. The Cliff at Penarth, Evening, Low Tide,



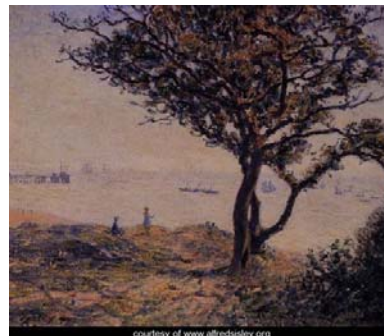
2. Bristol Channel from Penarth



3. Welsh Coast (Penarth)



4. A Cardiff Shipping Lane



Look at the map

Try and guess where Sisley was standing when he painted these.

Here are some clues to help you.

Two of the paintings show the view from the cliff looking south towards Lavernock and the island of Flat Holm in the Bristol Channel.

One painting shows a view from the cliff in the opposite direction northwards up the Bristol Channel, with a Steamer.

A Cardiff Shipping Lane was painted about 300 metres from the other paintings at the start of a popular coastal pathway from Penarth to Lavernock point.



Where do you think Sisley was standing when he painted **1, 2, 3** and **4**?
Write the **NUMBER OF THE PAINTING** on the map and draw an **ARROW** showing which **DIRECTION** you think Sisley was looking.