

Sisley

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Masters of Art

Alfred Sisley

(1839-1899)



Contents

The Highlights

Village Street in Marlotte (1866)
View of Montmartre from the cité des Fleurs (1869)
Footbridge at Argenteuil (1872)
Chemin de la Machine, Louveciennes (1873)
Foggy Morning, Voisins (1874)
The Lesson (1874)
Under the Bridge at Hampton Court (1874)
Snow at Louveciennes (1875)
View of Marly-le-Roi, Sunshine (1876)
Flood at Port Marly (1876)
Station at Sèvres (c. 1879)
Small Meadows in Spring, at By (c. 1881)
The Canal at Saint-Mammès (1885)
The Church at Moret in Morning Sun (1893)
Langland Bay, Storr's Rock — Morning (1897)

The Paintings

The Complete Paintings
Alphabetical List of Paintings

The Delphi Classics Catalogue

Sisley

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Masters of Art Series

Alfred Sisley



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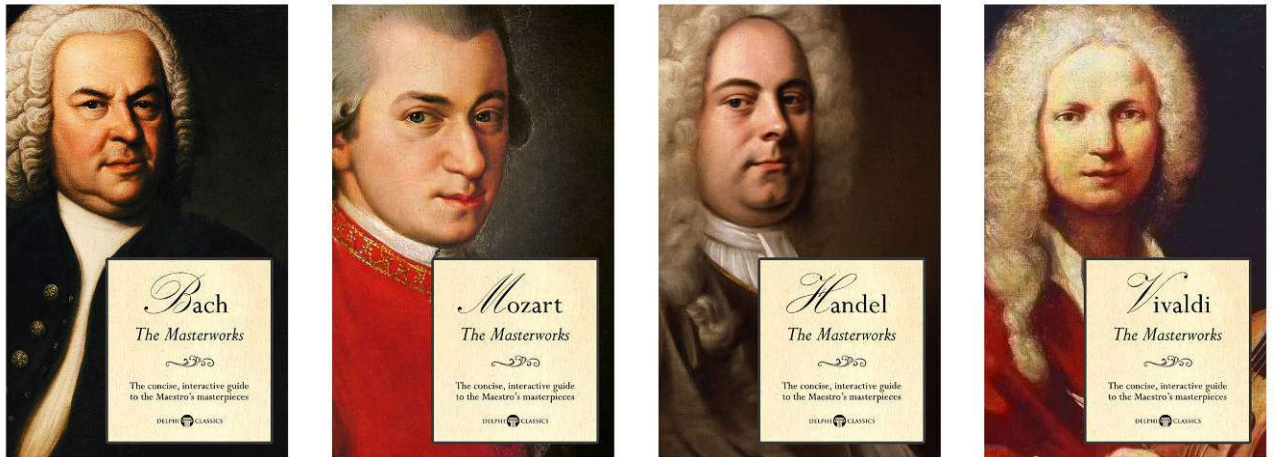
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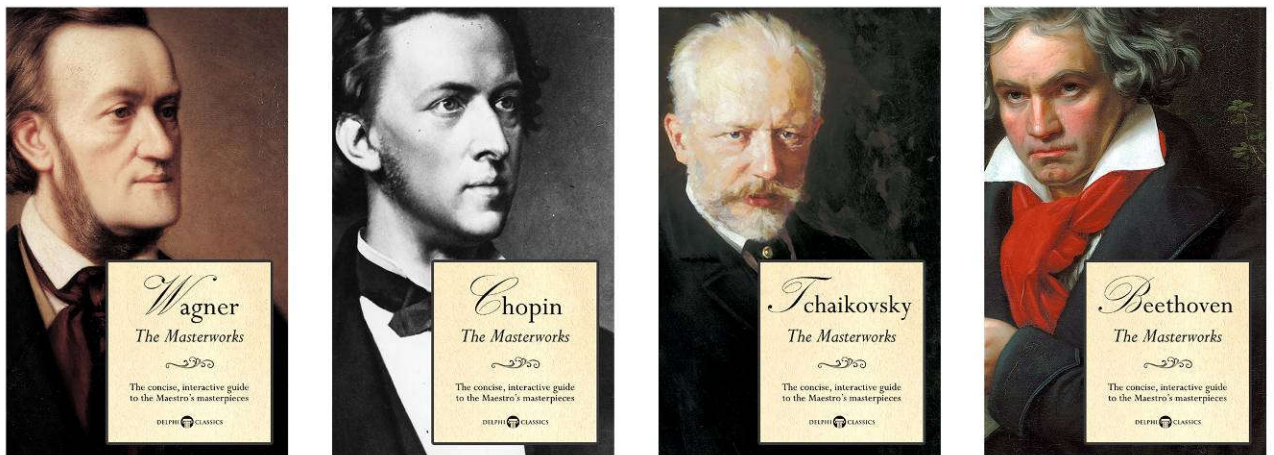
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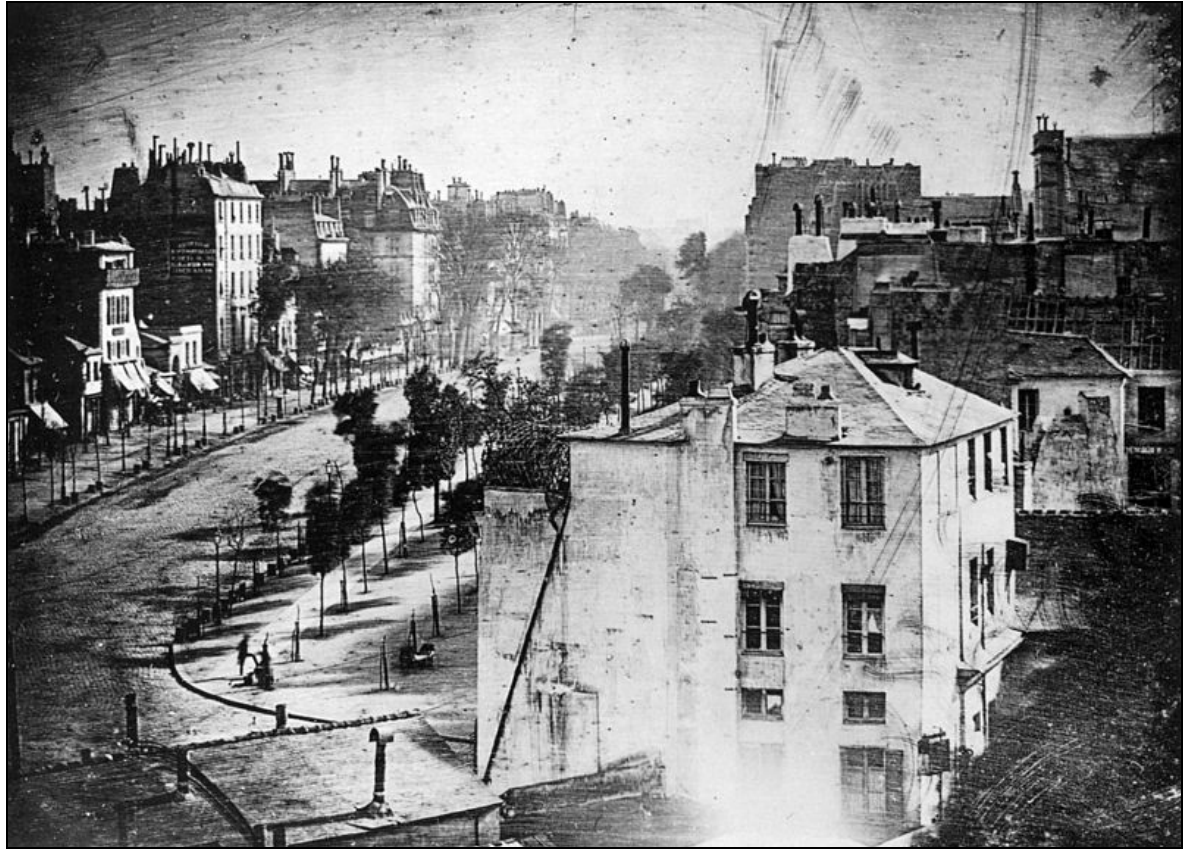


[*Explore the series so far...*](#)

The Highlights



'Paris, 1830' by Theodor Hoffbauer — Alfred Sisley was born in Paris in 1839.



"Boulevard du Temple", taken by Daguerre in 1838 in Paris, features the earliest known photograph of a person.



Sisley, c. 1882

The Highlights



In this section, a sample of Sisley's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

Village Street in Marlotte (1866)



One of the principal founders of French Impressionism, Alfred Sisley was born in Paris on 30 October 1839 to English parents. His father, William Sisley, was a prosperous textiles businessman, originally based in London, but who spent much of his career in Paris. His wife (and cousin) Felicia Sell was the daughter of a saddler from Lydd in Kent. The parents were in fact descended from successful smugglers, having lived in their youth at Romney Marsh, an area of Kent infamous for its smuggling traffic from the Continent.

Surely Sisley must be the least known of all the Impressionists. There are few surviving eye witness accounts, hardly any letters, three photographs and the few documents that have survived concerning him seem to contradict themselves. There is even a period of years that remain a mystery as to his activities. This absence of biographical detail is partly due to Sisley's shy and withdrawn character, which became more pronounced in later years. Since his death he has suffered critical neglect and has been too easily dismissed as a painter of charming snow scenes and floods.

Very little is known of Sisley's life until he was twenty-two years old. His mother was a woman of culture, sharing her interest in musical and literary tastes with her talented son. At the age of 16 he worked in his father's office in Paris and two years later he was sent to London for four years to prepare for a commercial career. Rather than adhering to business concerns, his time in England was preoccupied with visiting exhibitions, where he fell under the spell of the two great Romantic artists, Constable and Turner, as well as Corot and several other Barbizon painters that had by now found their way into London galleries.

It appears that in the autumn of 1860, Sisley took a decisive step in the pursuit of a life as an artist, when he entered the studio of Charles Gleyre, having persuaded his wealthy parents to allow him to study painting, abandoning his work in commerce. Charles Gleyre (1806-1874) was a Swiss artist, who had been a resident in France from an early age. He had taken over the studio of Paul Delaroche in 1843, when he taught a number of students that would become prominent artists, including George du Maurier, Monet, Toulmouche and Whistler. Ever mindful his own early years of poverty in Paris, Gleyre had waived aside teaching fees for the students at his atelier in the rue Vaugirard. Gleyre was no great pioneer, favouring academic doctrine, but he gained the affectionate respect from his students and peers for his independent views and tolerant attitude. More importantly, he encouraged the study *en plein air* (out of doors painting) and enjoyed painting landscapes, although he often advised that it was not the right subject on which to found a career. Ironically, two of his students — Monet and Sisley — were destined to become two of the greatest practitioners of landscape art in the nineteenth century.

The chief witness of Sisley's character during this early period is Renoir, except for a few recently discovered letters by students of Gleyre, illustrating him as a hardworking and gregarious student, who at the time was "living at home in the midst of a hospitable family". When Gleyre closed his school in 1864, Sisley left Paris on frequent excursions, painting at Chailly and Marlotte in the Forest of Fontainebleau. Unlike his friends Renoir and Monet, Sisley was financially secure, bolstered by a

generous allowance from his father, whose business was thriving. Renoir recalls Sisley at this time as having a marked “gentleness” of his disposition, quiet good manners and vivacious humour. Renoir later told his son Jean:

‘Sisley was a delightful human being... who could never resist a petticoat! We would be walking along a street, talking about the weather or something insignificant, and suddenly he would disappear! Then I would find him at his old game of flirting!’

Alas, none of Sisley’s student work is extant today. Therefore, his development as a young artist can only be deduced from a few paintings. These reveal the importance of Courbet and Corot, especially to the latter, to whom he would return time and time again. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875) was a French landscape and portrait painter, who functioned as a pivotal figure in the development of landscape art and whose vast output simultaneously references the Neo-Classical tradition and anticipates the *plein air* innovations of Impressionism. Though often credited as a precursor of this technique, Corot approached his landscapes more traditionally than is usually believed. Compared to the Impressionists, his palette is restrained, dominated by browns and blacks, along with dark and silvery green. Though appearing at times to be rapid and spontaneous, Corot’s brushstrokes were controlled and careful, and his compositions well-thought out and rendered as simply and concisely as possible, heightening the poetic effect of the imagery. As he famously stated,

“I noticed that everything that was done correctly on the first attempt was more true, and the forms more beautiful.”

In a rare surviving letter to Adolphe Tavernier, dated to 1893, Sisley stresses his agreement with Corot that an artist should paint the sky first, before the turning his attention to the main focus of the canvas — its formal point of departure. When comparing the works of Corot and Sisley, we can identify similar motifs: atmospheric woodland clearings; lonely bridges; edges of woods; empty roads leading towards the horizon; insignificant and anonymous figures in a solitary setting; buildings beside a river, often glimpsed through trees from the opposite bank.

In 1865 Sisley moved from Paris to Marlotte, a small town located in north central France. He was delighted with the numerous opportunities that the surrounding countryside offered him. *Village Street in Marlotte* (1866) is a typical example of Sisley’s debt to Corot’s style. Housed in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, it is a notably peaceful and unadventurous canvas, in contrast to the audacious works being produced by his friends Renoir and Monet at the time. Several characteristics of the painting, which can be detected in almost all of Sisley’s canvases, are the themes of detachment, integrity and a meticulous attention to tone.

It was likely completed in the autumn of 1865 during one of Sisley’s many painting trips to the Forest of Fontainebleau. Already by that time Marlotte was a popular location for landscape painters and Sisley’s friend Jules Le Coeur had recently purchased a house in the village. Like Corot before him, Sisley liked to pitch his easel at the edge of a wood or by the side of a road entering a village, allowing him to focus on country figures in intimate, yet undramatic settings. *Village Street in Marlotte* portrays a solitary figure chopping wood, surrounded by simple farm buildings. The artist opts for a sombre palette of greens, browns, and grey-blues, conveying a mood of isolation. Sisley was also fond of presenting a sunlit building against dark and looming foliage — another feature of Corot’s work. Unlike his

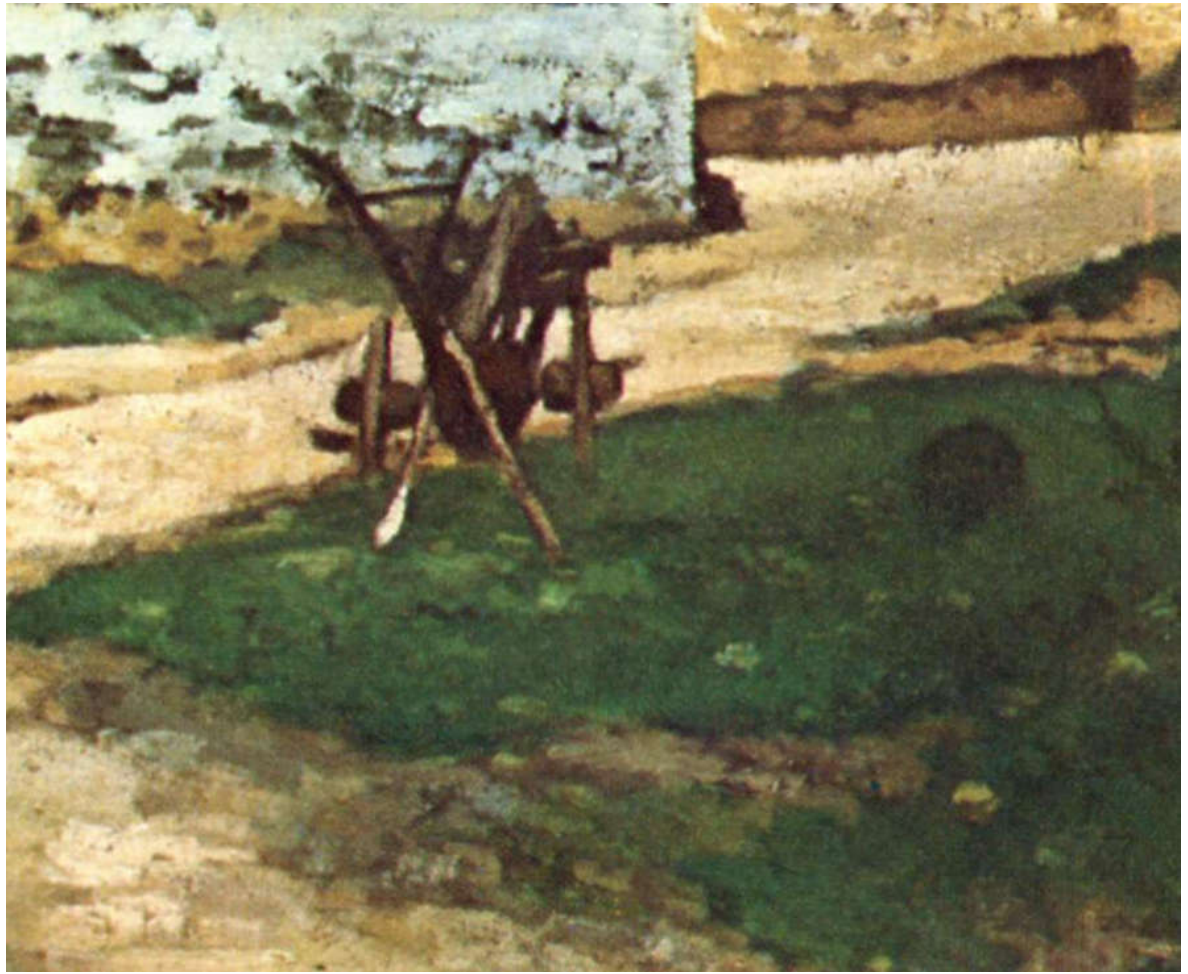
daring contemporaries, Sisley seldom traveled and felt no need to paint urban life, industrialisation or the more dramatic aspects of nature. Instead, he was content with painting the world close at hand, following instead in the footsteps — and brushstrokes — of his great hero Corot.

In 1866, Sisley, Renoir, Monet and Bazille all submitted paintings to the distinguished Salon — at the time the only formal way in which an artist could exhibit his work to a large public audience. Remarkably, all four were accepted, as was their new colleague, Berthe Morisot. Sisley's two submissions were *Village Street in Marlotte* and the pendent piece, *Woman going to the Woods*, and they received some critical notice. However, this initial Salon success was short-lived and in the following year, all four artists were rejected, prompting Sisley, Renoir, Bazille, Pissarro and Cézanne to sign a petition demanding a new *Salon des refusés* — though this was largely ignored by the government. Salon recognition would continue to be sporadic for Sisley. Although he submitted work regularly during the 1860's, his paintings were only accepted on three occasions.

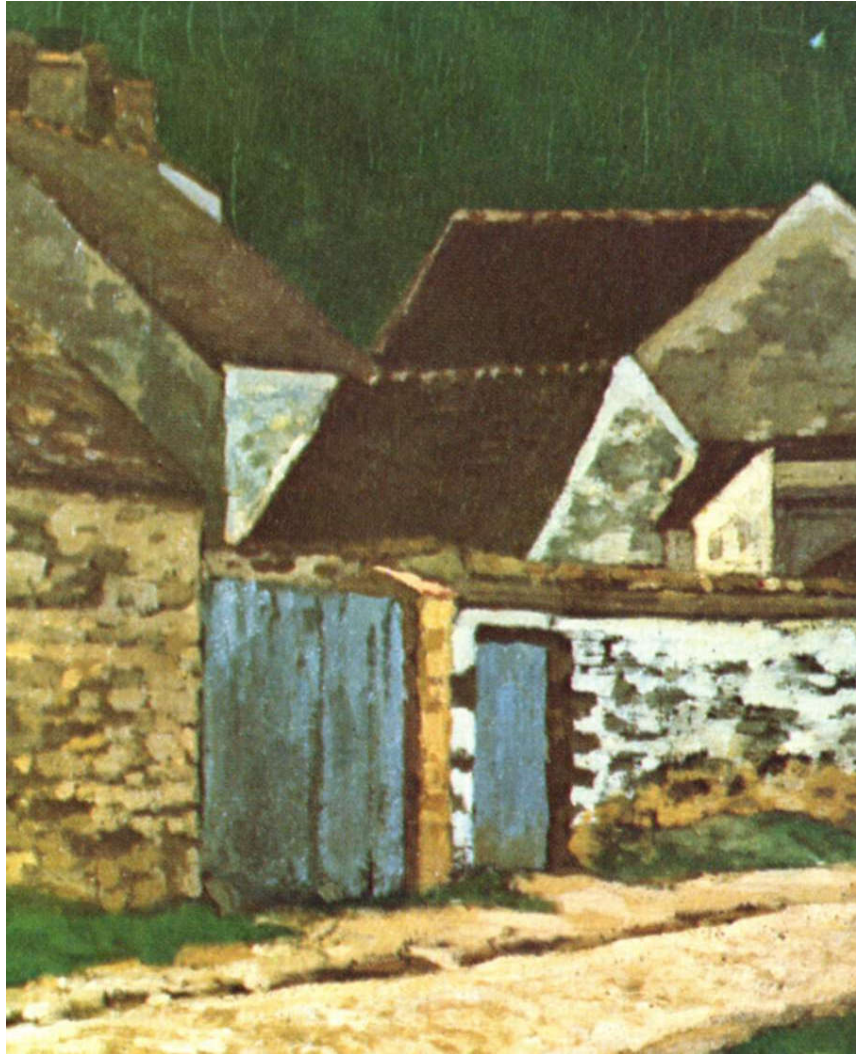




Detail



Detail



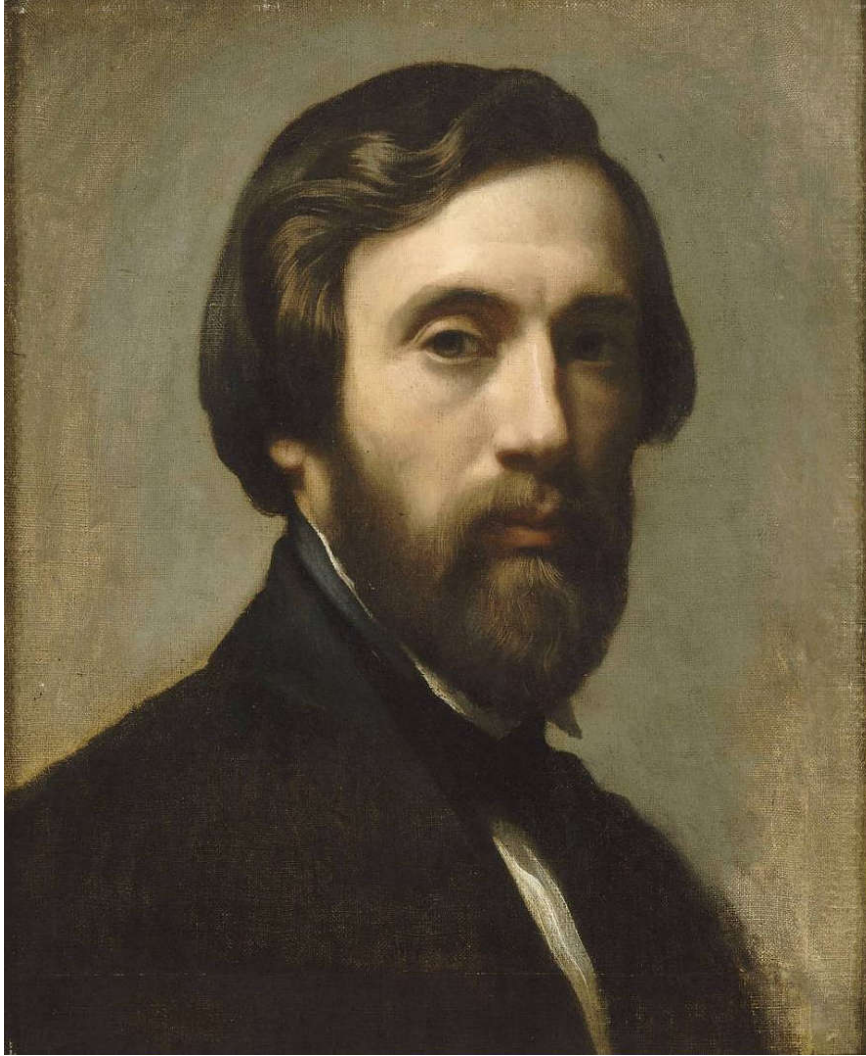
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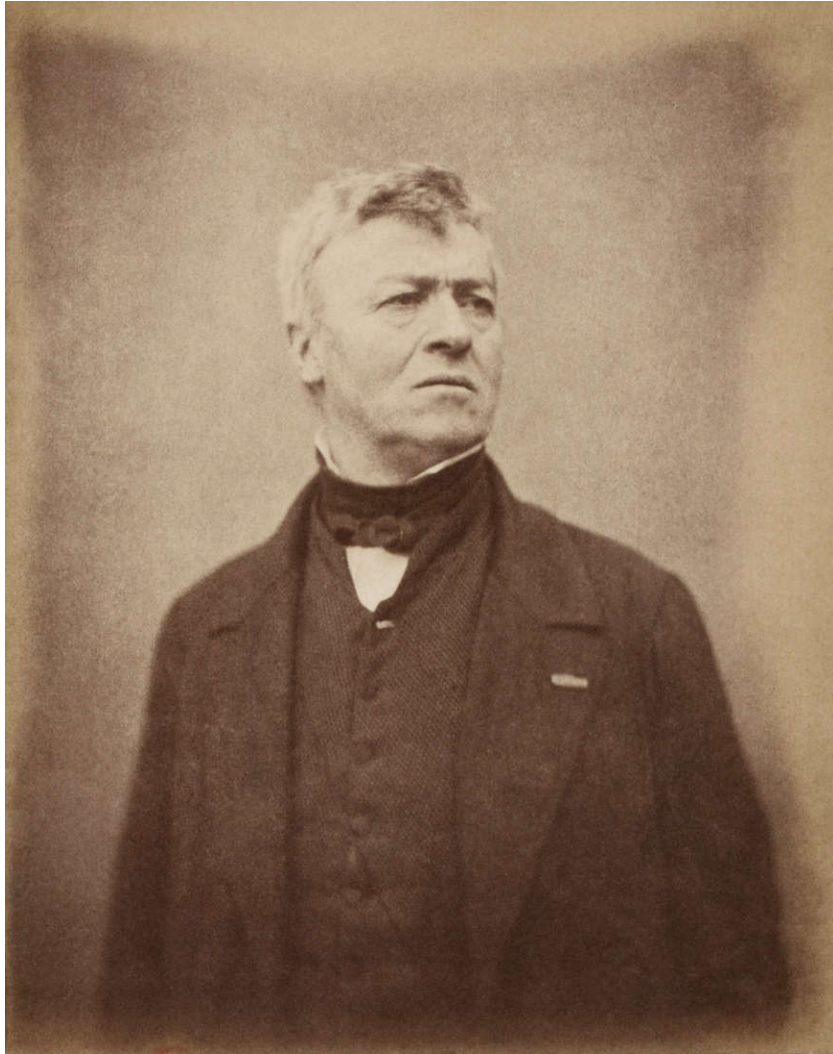
Detail



Detail



Charles Gleyre's self portrait, Palace of Versailles, 1841



Portrait of Corot, c. 1850



'View from the Farnese Gardens' by Corot, The Phillips Collection, 1826

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End of Sample