

# *Constable: oil sketches*

from the Victoria and Albert Museum





Fig. 1. Map of Great Britain highlighting Constable Country. Designed by Balder Martens.

This exhibition explores the role of the oil sketch in the artistic practice of the English landscape painter John Constable (1776–1837). The eighty-five works of art on view are arranged chronologically and span the years 1802 to 1836—from when Constable was aged twenty-eight and beginning his career as a professional artist until the year before his death. The highlights are the full-scale oil sketches (figs. 2 and 3) that Constable painted for *The Hay*



Fig. 2

*Wain* and *The Leaping Horse*, two of his largest and most renowned works. In addition, there are smaller oil sketches, drawings, watercolors, and one finished painting by the artist. This exhibition therefore provides an overview of Constable's work in all the media he employed, while emphasizing the special significance of the oil sketches that many consider his supreme achievement.

Constable made oil sketches for his own purposes. They therefore are more private than the finished oil paintings that he submitted to the annual juried exhibitions at the Royal Academy in London and sought to sell. He produced the small oil sketches quickly and inexpensively. Hundreds survive. He used them to study transient atmospheric effects and to build a rich vocabulary of English landscape motifs: bridges and locks, churches and cottages, clouds and rainbows, flat fields and rolling hills, farm laborers with their implements and animals, the River Stour and the North Sea. Some of the small oil sketches were painted in his studio, but many were substantially



Fig. 3

executed in the open air. Tiny holes in the corners sometimes help us to identify which ones were painted outdoors, for it was the artist's custom to pin his support to the lid of a portable paint box while he sat in a field

and worked from nature. Looking at many of his small oil sketches together allows us to appreciate his experiments with his technique and types of support. In contrast to the small oil sketches, Constable's full-scale oil sketches are larger and far fewer in number, represent a greater investment from the artist in terms of his time and materials, and were always painted indoors. As the next-to-last step in the making of major pictures for exhibition at the Royal Academy, the full-scale sketches served the specific purpose of helping the artist work out the masses, details, and tones of his most ambitious compositions.

In terms of subject matter, Constable represented the places he knew best, beginning with the buildings, land, and waterways of the Stour Valley in Suffolk, where he was born and raised (see figs. 1 and 4). His father was involved in the transportation of corn and coal along the canalized River Stour, which meanders through eastern England and divides the counties of Suffolk and Essex. In addition to barges and a ship, the Constable family owned mills perched along the riverbanks at Dedham and Flatford and the windmill at East Bergholt. Whereas Constable's father made a career out of managing the countryside, Constable painted it.

A frequent landmark in Constable's paintings and drawings of the Stour Valley is the tall and sturdy rectangular bell tower of St. Mary's Church in Dedham (fig. 4). Other common sites include his father's mill at Flatford and the cottage next door to it inhabited by a tenant farmer named Willy Lott (cover illustration and fig. 2). By Constable's own account, every aspect of the region excited his imagination. In a letter of 1821 he wrote, "the sound of water escaping from mill-dams etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things." He became so closely associated with depictions of the Stour Valley that by the end of his life it was already being called Constable Country, which is how it is still known today.



Fig. 4

Constable insisted on the importance of direct observation in the creation of his paintings; however, it is also clear that his response to nature was informed and enriched by his study of the Old Masters. The way in which he routinely framed his compositions in an arch of trees is reminiscent of the earlier French painter Claude Lorrain (ca. 1604 or 1605–1682), while the attention he paid to such things as cows and windmills, along with moving light and shadows cast by clouds, shows how much he absorbed from copying seventeenth-century Dutch landscapes. Constable's subjects were also rooted in a literary tradition that extends back to Virgil's *Georgics*, an ancient poem about agriculture that extols the virtues of country life.



Fig. 5

Constable began spending less time in the Stour Valley after he married Maria Bicknell in 1816, and the range of his subjects broadened to include other places in England. After initially settling in London, he and his wife, along with their seven children, made Hampstead, a village four miles north of the city, their primary home. For Maria, who suffered from consumption, its elevated position above London offered cleaner air, while for Constable it provided inspiration in the form of magnificent views and constantly changing skies. During the years 1819 to 1822, he obsessively looked to the heavens and painted the sky. His cloud studies are astonishing for their accuracy in depicting different cloud behaviors, colors, and forms (fig. 5). His letters from this period indicate he was searching for ways to make the skies in his exhibition pictures more expressive.

In the 1820s Constable made repeated visits to Salisbury and Brighton. To Salisbury, a city in southwest England, he went to see his friend and patron Dr. John Fisher, the local bishop. In oil sketches, pencil drawings, and finished paintings, Constable made views of Salisbury's majestic Gothic cathedral and its remarkable natural setting (fig. 6). Just as he had in the Stour Valley, he defined the place by its most conspicuous church steeple. To Brighton, a coastal resort in southern England, Constable went with his family because doctors prescribed sea air for his wife. Constable's letters indicate that he strongly disliked Brighton, yet the oil sketches he painted there are among his most exquisite (fig. 7). The blues of the sky and water, the dramatic changes in light and weather, and the boats riding on waves were all things well suited to his art.



Fig. 6

As Constable grew older, he tended to favor watercolors and drawings over oil sketches, probably because they were easier to make. In the early to mid-1830s, he often revisited Stour Valley subjects, but, given how much time he was spending in Hampstead and London, these works must have been substantially recreated from memory. They include a pencil and sepia sketch dated circa 1831 to 1836 (fig. 8). The medium allowed the artist to concentrate on light and shade as a form of expression. The way the trees frame the vertical composition shows that his admiration for Claude was lifelong. In the distance, under a stormy sky, another one of the artist's lodestars—the tower of St. Mary's in Dedham—is recognizable, despite being rendered as little more than a simple block. This poignant drawing is one of the last works he ever made. He died unexpectedly in March 1837 at the age of sixty.

Constable's descendants and early collectors of his work bequeathed hundreds of his sketches in various media, along with important examples of his exhibition pictures, to the South Kensington Museum in London, which opened in 1852 and was renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in 1899. Thanks to these gifts, the V&A now possesses the largest and most comprehensive collection of Constable's work anywhere in the world and is able to provide us with this intimate view of Constable's creative processes throughout his career. This exhibition, which is being shown in the United States only at the Princeton University Art Museum and the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, marks the first time that the *Full-scale Study for "The Hay Wain"* and the *Full-scale Study for "The Leaping Horse"* have been seen by the American public since undergoing a painstaking conservation treatment, which removed discolored old varnishes to reveal the vibrant colors used by the artist.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

To learn more about Constable and the works in this exhibition, see the catalogue written by Mark Evans with Nicola Costaras and Clare Richardson, *John Constable: Oil Sketches from the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 2011. The Victoria and Albert Museum and Artfinder have produced an Apple iPad application of the same name that is available for purchase from the Apple App Store.

Trinita Kennedy, *curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts*

#### Illustrations:

Cover: John Constable. *Willy Lott's House near Flatford Mill*, ca. 1811. Oil on paper, 9 1/2 x 7 1/8 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 166-1888. © Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A images

Fig. 1. Map of Great Britain highlighting Constable Country. Designed by Balder Martens.

Fig. 2. John Constable. *Full-scale Study for "The Hay Wain,"* 1821. Oil on canvas, 54 x 74 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 987-1900; Bequeathed by Henry Vaughan, 1900. © Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A images

Fig. 3. John Constable. *Full-scale Study for "The Leaping Horse,"* 1825. Oil on canvas, 51 x 74 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 986-1900; Bequeathed by Henry Vaughan, 1900. © Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A images

Fig. 4. John Constable. *The Valley of the Stour with Dedham in the Distance*, ca. 1805-9. Oil on paper, later lined onto canvas, 19 1/4 x 23 1/2 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 321-1888. © Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A images

Fig. 5. John Constable. *Study of Cirrus Clouds*, ca. 1821-22. Oil on paper, 4 1/2 x 7 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 784-1888. © Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A images

Fig. 6. John Constable. *Salisbury Cathedral from the South-west*, ca. 1820. Oil on canvas, later lined, 9 7/8 x 11 7/8 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 319-1888. © Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A images

Fig. 7. John Constable. *Brighton Beach*, 1824. Oil on paper, 4 3/4 x 11 5/8 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 783-1888. © Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A images

Fig. 8. John Constable. *View on the Stour; Dedham Church in the Distance*, ca. 1831-6. Pencil and sepia wash, 8 x 6 5/8 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 249-1888. © Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A images

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919 Broadway  
Nashville, TN 37203  
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